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Maintaining gemeinschaft during a century of change : rural school consolidation in Iowa, a case study

Leah Fran Tookey
Iowa State University

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Maintaining *gemeinschaft* during a century of change:
Rural school consolidation in Iowa,
a case study

by

Leah Fran Tookey

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Major Professor
R. Douglas Hurt
Robert Tremmel

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of
Leah Fran Tookey
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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ABSTRACT

During the twentieth century, three separate movements of school consolidation have threatened many small Iowa communities and their most defining institution: the local school. Displaying a common human response when their identity was attacked, ruralites in small communities fought to defend the rural school from the designs of education reformers and state lawmakers. Rural school reform has been a nation-wide movement and Iowa's experiences were, in many ways, typical, and illustrative of this struggle.

In the small Southwestern Iowa community of Exira, residents faced each of these three eras of consolidation in much the same way most communities in Iowa did. During the Progressive Era, they united to build a new school building that would be the pride of the small town for decades. During the 1950s, Exirans once again faced reorganization head on and built a new and modern high school to house the expanding numbers baby boom generation students. In the mid 1980s however, Exirans resisted the state's aggressive actions to force consolidation on the many small school districts in Iowa. This time they struggled and won the right to keep their school.

This study focuses on the "place" that is Exira and how the citizens responded when their community was threatened by consolidation, and how they fought to maintain their sense of place and space. This is the story of Exira and its struggle to build, maintain, and finally save its school district during a century of change.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

A homeland has its landmarks, which may be features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments, shrines, a hallowed battlefield or cemetery. These visible signs serve to enhance a people's sense of identity; they encourage awareness of land and loyalty to place. But a strong attachment to the homeland can emerge quite apart from any explicit concept of sacredness; it can form without the memory of heroic battles won and lost . . . Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sound and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasure accumulated over time.

-- Yi-Fu Tuan¹

During the twentieth century, three separate movements of school consolidation have threatened many small Iowa communities and their most defining institution: the local school. Displaying a common human response when their identity was attacked, ruralites in small communities fought to defend the rural school from the designs of education reformers and state lawmakers. Rural school reform has been a nation-wide movement and Iowa's experiences were, in many ways, typical, and illustrative of this struggle. In looking back over the three movements of consolidation and reorganization in Iowa and in the rest of the country, it is not difficult to identify the causes of each. A desire to save the fundamental makeup of an agrarian society in a newly forming urban milieu brought about the first movement; the need for modernization of an outdated system for the new modern world brought the second, and economic necessity in a business-oriented world brought the third. Clearly, these movements came as answers to calls for stabilization, standardization, and efficiency. For rural Iowans, however, education reform brought disruption and upheaval to their traditional lifestyles. The sense of belonging and the community bonds ruralites shared

¹ Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 159.

were damaged, forcing them to reconsider and readjust their identities and their sense of place.

In rural Iowa, local schools play an integral part in the community. Not only do they provide education for the community's children, they also serve as a meeting place for civic and social organizations, a voting location, and a site for recreation. This vital thread in the fundamental warp of the fabric of small communities accounts for the outcry Iowans have raised when their schools were threatened by state mandated consolidation efforts. Residents in small towns believe that their school is the center of their community and their "fight to save it is a fight to preserve the community's cohesion and identity."² The purpose of this study is to illustrate how, throughout the twentieth century, one small town in Iowa responded to the threats of consolidation it faced: threats which residents perceived would destroy their beloved community.

Sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and historians have long attempted to define "community" and determine its importance to the human condition. Academic thinking has, in the past, focused on community as simply a matter of territory instead of considering the people who lived there, but today, many academics admit that community is a concept which involves more than just land. Historian Darrett Rutman argues that "community is something which existed at a point in time and either does not exist today or exists in a very much diluted form; hence it is something whose disappearance or decline is a

² Sonya Salamon, "The Rural People of the Midwest," in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, ed., Emery N. Castle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 360-61; Daryl Hobbs, "Social Organization in the Countryside," in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, ed., Emery N. Castle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 387.

historical event to be explored.”³ Rutman gives two definitions of community. (1) “A group of people living together in some identifiable territory and sharing a set of interests embracing their lifeways,” and (2) “That mythical state of social wholeness in which each member has his place and in which life is regulated by cooperation rather than by competition. It . . . always seems to be in decline at any given historical present. Thus community is that which each generation feels it must rediscover and re-create.”⁴ Thomas Bender argues that while the most common definition of community today focuses on locality and assumes that community is a microcosm of the larger society, it is better defined as an experience rather than a place. Community should be defined as a “network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds.” He further argues, “Once the notion of community is understood as a social network characterized by a distinctive kind of human interaction, it becomes possible to take community seriously as a historical phenomenon.”⁵

Both Rutman and Bender refer to the study of community done by Ferdinand Tönnies in nineteenth-century Germany. Tönnies used the terms *Gemeinschaft* to define community and *Gesellschaft* to define society. He saw *gemeinschaft* as a warm, personal, friendly place found in small rural communities and *gesellschaft* as a cold, impersonal, and fragmented existence that one experienced when living in the city. Tönnies feared that *gesellschaft* was replacing a disappearing *gemeinschaft*. Both Bender and Rutman argue the theory is false; *gemeinschaft* in fact does still exist in small rural communities as well as neighborhoods in

³ Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *Small Worlds, Large Questions: Exploration in Early American Social History, 1600 – 1850* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 35.

⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵ Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 5-11.

larger cities. I agree and would go a step farther to say that *gemeinschaft* is not being replaced by *gesellschaft*, but is rather abandoned when small towns lose their schools -- the nexus of their community -- thus losing the businesses and people that create and maintain *gemeinschaft*.⁶ Rural Iowans recognized that the future of their community, its comfortable “small size, intimacy, slow pace, and simplicity,” depends upon their ability to maintain this sense of *gemeinschaft*.⁷ Because the concept of “community” is difficult to define, many historians avoid the subject all together. By looking at how one small Iowa town dealt with the threatened loss of their school, and possibly, the loss of their community identity, however, it is possible to put a personal face on the larger trend, and bring the bigger picture into focus, thus “community” becomes more approachable.⁸

The sense of community that came with the development of a local school began during the earliest period of Iowa’s history. Farmers and rural residents established the first schools in the open country and the schools formed the basis for rural neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were made up of small family farms and they were the foundation for rural social organization. By 1895, Iowa had 14,000 one-room schools; more than any other state.⁹ Beginning in the early twentieth century, rural school consolidation became a menace to many small school districts. The first of the three movements of consolidation resulted from a Progressive critique of rural life. Progressives argued that problems in rural America were the result of family farmers fleeing to urban areas due to the declining opportunities in the

⁶ Rutman, *Small Worlds, Large Questions*, 37; Bender, *Community and Social Change*, 17-18.

⁷ Salamon, “The Rural People of the Midwest,” 362.

⁸ Hobbs, “Social Organization in the Countryside,” 390.

⁹ David R. Reynolds, “Rural Education: Decentering the Consolidation Debate,” in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, ed., Emery N. Castle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 451.

countryside. Progressives, particularly members of the Country Life Movement, outlined several changes that needed to be made in rural school systems throughout the country to counter the urban draw. Consolidation of the many small one-room schoolhouses that dotted the landscape, however, was the movement's central goal. Despite some successes, most rural school districts remained in existence at the beginning of the Great Depression, which ended the first era.

The second movement of school consolidation came during the 1950s. Because of the Cold War and a new awareness of the importance of science and math, a contingent of educators who believed that rural children were not getting the same quality of education as children in urban areas, nor access to quality high schools, argued for a more advanced and competitive form of education. During this period, most small one-room country schools in Iowa, as well as the rest of the country, closed their doors, and rural districts joined to form a community school district, complete with a high school, in many small towns. When this period of reorganization ended in 1962, there were 469 school districts left in Iowa.¹⁰

In the mid 1980s a third era of consolidation began when three factors, a drop in rural population, a change from a rural society based on agriculture to one based on agribusiness, and a loss of the small businesses that supported rural Iowa communities, led to a need for drastic economic change. State legislators passed several laws that required small districts to re-evaluate their viability, and during the next ten years these new laws forced many small communities to close one or all of their school buildings either as part of a whole-grade

¹⁰ Guy Ghan, "Periodic Reports: School District Reorganization Report," June 1993, [On-line], available from <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/ecese/asis/reorg/index.html#rds>, accessed 16 February 2003.

sharing agreement, or a total reorganization. When this era came to a close in 1995 there were only 379 school districts still operating in Iowa.¹¹

According to David R. Reynolds, geographer and author of *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*, rural Iowans had a long list of objections to consolidation, but throughout the three movements, and in every region of the state, five general concerns always seemed to surface. First rural people objected to consolidation because they believed it would take away local control of their childrens' education. Second, ruralites felt that consolidation was being pushed on them "whether they wanted it or not." Third was the issue of taxation and the inevitability of a tax increase. Fourth, parents did not like the idea of transporting their children long distances on buses or by car. Finally, the fifth concern was that consolidation was usually the only option presented to local communities. Rural residents wondered why the state was only willing to take away what they already had instead of making their existing schools better.¹²

Within most of these concerns a common thread appears. Except for the issue of taxation, each of these issues deals with the loss of the individual's sense of place and control. In his book *Place and Space: The Perspective of Experience*, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan states "Human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world. . . . Should destruction occur we may reasonably conclude that the people would be thoroughly demoralized, since the ruin of their settlement implies the ruin of their cosmos." Tuan further argues that the hometown is an intimate place and the attachment

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Reynolds, "Rural Education," 463-64.

of its residents to it is a common human emotion. The more ties there are, and the longer those ties have existed, the stronger the emotional bond. The town becomes a sacred place and the school building a shrine. Clearly, these are the sentiments and the reactions rural Iowans experienced each time a new era of consolidation threatened their local schools.¹³

With each era of consolidation, the ties to the school house became stronger. During the 1910s, most communities erected a new building to house area high school students and elementary students from the local community. During 1950s, when country schools closed, many communities built high school buildings and converted their original buildings to elementary schools. These new high schools became the social and recreational center for the community and the countryside. A community's identity was based on the pride of place surrounding the high school building, which residents saw as a "space" where students, parents, and all townspeople united for shared activities and found their sense of individual "place."¹⁴ Reynolds argues that the "principal issues at stake in the consolidation debate[s] . . . were clear: the choice was between what was good for society, equality of educational opportunity for all individuals in the larger society, and what was good for the community, a sense of collective identity and a set of shared values and a means of reproducing them."¹⁵ This was the struggle rural residents faced throughout the twentieth century as they fought to save their schools.

¹³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 145, 148, 150.

¹⁴ Reynolds, "Rural Education," 472-73.

¹⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

A Peaceful Protest: Community Response to Progressive Era Reform

In May of 1851, when Nathaniel “Natty” Hamlin, followed the Mormon Trail back from Kanesville, Iowa, (now Council Bluffs,) to settle in the newly organized, Audubon County, Iowa, one of the first projects he undertook was the formation of a school to educate his five children. His fellow settlers Peoria I. Whitted, Daniel M. Harris, James Eagan, Richard M. Lewis, and John M. Donnel, along with others, assisted him in the endeavor. The men worked together to cut the logs, “rive” the long shingles, set the glass-paned windows, hang the door, and build the desks for the school.¹ The building measured twenty-four by thirty feet and was valued at \$1,300. Natty and his fellow settlers did not actually spend that much money on the building however; they pooled their resources, donated supplies and labor, traded wheat, corn, and produce for items such as glass windowpanes and nails, and in the end spent less than \$100 on the project.² The Hamlin school served the community until 1871 when residents of the city of Exira created the first independent school district in the county and built a two-room, two-story building. In the meantime, Audubon County residents constructed other schools in the countryside. By 1865 there were five school houses in the county and by 1878 there were forty-nine school buildings to house the over 1,200 pupils in Audubon county. Hamlin and most of his fellow settlers moved to the area from crowded, eastern Ohio. They brought with them not only a longing to create a new community and maintain a rural lifestyle, but also a resolution to educate their children and a clear understanding of the importance of education. Education continued to be one of the

¹ H. F. Andrews, ed., *History of Audubon County Iowa: Its People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Company, 1915), 238. See Map 1 for location of Audubon County.

² According to one county history, the only loss involved with the project was four gallons of linseed oil “which had been drunk by a cow!” *Biographical History of Shelby and Audubon Counties, Iowa* (Chicago: W. S. Dunbar & Co., 1889), 677.

most important, and eventually most contested issues in the history of this small southwestern Iowa county.

Exira was typical of many small Iowa communities. Pioneers from overcrowded eastern states settled there in the 1840s, and by the 1860s the railroad brought commerce and industry to the area. By the turn of the century the tiny settlement was a thriving community whose residents were active and took pride in its many activities. Exirans were particularly proud of their school and continually worked to improve it and its benefits for their children. As the twentieth century dawned, so did the progressive movement with its ideas about efficiency and advancement. Progressives throughout the country focused their attention on rural life and rural education and Exira did not escape their scrutiny. Exira was also typical in the way it reacted to this progressive attentiveness. Community leaders, led by W. J. Lancelot, the progressive editor of the local paper, and members of the Community Club urged citizens to build a new school and equip it with all the modern features needed to provide an excellent education for the town's youth. The community passed not one but two tax levies to support the new building and reveled in the new facility when it was completed. The citizens were not willing to take their progressive leaders' advice when it came to consolidation, however. Unlike the Buck Creek School District that David Reynolds profiled in his work on rural school consolidation in Iowa during the early part of the twentieth century, Exira, and most small districts in Iowa, did not consolidate with the surrounding rural districts as progressives in the community, state, and nation had hoped. Instead, they

strengthened their own independent district and for thirty years maintained a community identity that was separate from the neighboring rural school districts.³

Exira, the oldest surviving city in the county, is bordered on the north by the Nishnabotna River and along the west by David's Creek. Peoria Whitted platted the town in 1857 and Judge John Eckman, a visitor from Ohio, purchased the first lot with the understanding that if he did so, founding fathers would name the town after his daughter, Exira. They did and by the end of the decade, the little community was thriving. Founders situated Exira near the train depot, as were most small towns that grew up around the railroad. The first public building in the settlement was the Hamlin school and it served not only as a center for education but as a courthouse and church. In 1858, James Poor and Avery Belcher built kilns and started the first industry in the city, a brickyard. Judge Harris served as the postmaster from the very beginning and hand delivered the mail to the city's residents once a week when it arrived in town from Adel, Iowa. By 1857 there were several dwellings in Exira, and Palmer Rogers had built a hotel that served the town for several decades.⁴

The population of Audubon County continued to grow, and as it did so the need for more schools increased. Most of the first schools were in the southern part of the county. Settlers did not begin to move into the northern sections until the 1870s when the railroad ran a branch line from Atlantic, Iowa in Cass County to Audubon in northern Audubon County.⁵

³ David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).

⁴ Historical Program Committee, *100 Years in Exira, 1857 – 1957* (n.p., 1957), 12-13.

⁵ See Map 2. For this study, I have focused on Audubon, Exira, Greeley, Hamlin, Oakfield, and Sharon Townships in the southern half of Audubon County. Of these, Audubon, Greeley, Hamlin and Oakfield

In 1865, the five school houses in the county were all within a ten mile radius of Exira. The following year county residents built four more schools, all still in close proximity to the small town. In 1866, county superintendent Benjamin F. Thomas held the first county institute. Professor Enos of Cedar Falls, Iowa taught the institute and at least fifteen area teachers attended. These institutes were an important part of education in rural Iowa and in the rest of the country. Education leaders used the institutes to instruct teachers about the newest pedagogical techniques and procedures. As the decades proceeded, teacher institutes became an annual event in Audubon County.⁶

All the schools in Audubon County were rural districts until 1876 when citizens of Exira began the first independent school district in the county. Educators defined independent school districts as districts that existed in cities, towns, and villages, and where the children who lived in these towns attended. Many of these independent districts did not have upper level classes; however, Exira's school provided the first two years of high school along with the primary grades. The two-story building cost \$2,800 in 1871 and in 1880, Exirans added a \$3,500 dollar addition to the structure.⁷

In 1884, Charles F. Wilcutt became the county superintendent of schools. He had been the head of the Exira school for several years, and while serving in that capacity he graded the school and brought it up to standard. Most rural schools were not graded,

Townships all share coterminous boundaries with Exira Township in which the city of Exira is located. I am looking particularly at these townships because sub-district schools in them would most likely consolidate with Exira Independent School. Townships in the northern half of Audubon County would have been more likely to consolidate with Audubon, Viola, or Gray schools.

⁶ Andrews, *History of Audubon County*, 239 – 40.

⁷ *Biographical History*, 677; Program Committee, *100 Years in Exira*, 71.

meaning they had only one classroom and teacher. The lone teacher taught every child in small groups depending on age, ability, and previous education. Often older children helped with the younger ones and the younger ones learned from listening to the older students' recitations. Wilcutt divided the Exira school into five classes and it became the first graded school in the county. When Wilcutt became county superintendent, he established the county school system and was the force behind its success. In 1889, when he retired, there were approximately nine rural school districts in each of the twelve townships with a total of 115 districts including the two independent schools in Exira and Audubon. There were 3,283 students in the county attending school. When Natty Hamlin died in 1897, he was likely very proud of the community he and his fellow settlers had founded nearly fifty years before. Education continued to be an important part of the little "City Beautiful" and Hamlin was no doubt proud of his legacy.⁸ America's progressive leaders and educators were neither as positive nor as supportive of rural education in the country as Hamlin and his fellow Exirans were however.

For many Americans the first two decades of the twentieth century were generally prosperous. Urban areas grew and advancing technologies like electricity, telephones, and central heating made urbanites' lives easier. Most of these technological advances came more slowly to the rural Midwest. Electricity did not reach many rural farm homes until well into the 1950s. Telephones arrived in the 1910s, however, radios, not available commercially until the 1920s were actually more popular in rural homes than in those in the city. Like urban homes, urban schools had been improving dramatically during the latter part of the

⁸ Andrews, *History of Audubon County*, 240. The *Audubon County Journal* began referring to Exira as the "City Beautiful" shortly after the turn of the century; by 1913, it appeared in the paper's header.

nineteenth century and into the twentieth when educators introduced new forms of advanced curriculum, graded classrooms, provided uniform textbooks, and hired well-trained teachers. Urban school districts also improved the conditions of education for their students by providing modern school houses with well-equipped science and home economics classrooms, large gymnasiums, indoor toilet facilities, and central heating.⁹

Most scholars of education history agree that rural education changed very little during this period and in fact was very much like it had been in 1880. Many country school teachers still had little training and few were normal school graduates. Teachers' pay was very low so teaching remained a transitional position that young women, and some men, took to tide them over until marriage or other opportunities came along. Teacher turnover was frequent; often more than one teacher served a country school per term. School buildings were also inadequate. Poor ventilation, heating, and lighting were problems, and some rural schools did not have outhouses or a source of fresh water. Country schools did not provide text books for their students and the curriculum depended upon what the teacher knew and was generally limited to the basics: reading, writing, and arithmetic.¹⁰

Progressive Americans during the early part of the twentieth century were critical of many aspects of rural life, and education was just one of the areas where they began to focus their attention. Their findings led to a general sense of alarm regarding the future of agrarian

⁹ Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 218-21; R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 272; Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 123.

¹⁰ Keach Johnson, "Elementary and Secondary Education in Iowa, 1890 – 1900: A Time of Awakening, Part 1," *Annals of Iowa*, 45 (1979): 103-04.

society. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt, in reaction to this sentiment, created the Country Life Commission to find a cure for the ills of rural America.¹¹

The Country Life Commission consisted of a group of middle-class professionals who believed something was missing in rural America that was causing rural and agricultural people to move to urban areas. These progressives wanted “rural reform that would make the social, intellectual, and economic aspects of country life more satisfying.”¹² They believed that antiquated farming techniques and low farm profits were causing farmers to become dissatisfied with life on the farm, and thus they and their children were quickly moving into the city. This was cause for concern for many urban dwellers because food prices were rising and they were beginning to feel the economic pinch. Many of these reformers believed that rural education and its deficiencies was one of the causes for this disruption in rural America. They believed that if extension agents could teach farmers more about modern farm practices and persuade farmers to use them, they would be more productive and thus more satisfied. If rural educators could teach farm children the glories of farm and rural living, they and their parents would be more willing to stay on the farm. “Rural population, more than any other circumstance, was at the heart of the Country Life Movement. To have a healthy society, many believed that a prosperous rural population was a necessity.”¹³ With this in mind, President Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission in order to research

¹¹ Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 163.

¹² William L. Bowers, “Country-Life Reform, 1900-1920: A Neglected Aspect of Progressive Era History” *Agricultural History* 45 (Fall 1971): 211-21.

¹³Theobald, 166.

country life in America and determine what its problems were and what the nation could do to fix them.

Most of these reformers based their ideas about rural and country matters on Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer myth. They believed that the farmer represented the best in American society. According to followers of the Country Life Movement, farmers were intelligent, hard working, and honest individuals. Country Lifers hoped to preserve the ideals and values of rural life in a complex urbanized world. They did not want farmers to continue in an outdated agricultural economy, but rather hoped that they could hold onto the virtuous ideals of agrarian past while moving into an industrial future.¹⁴ Reformers were especially interested in farmers becoming as efficient as possible to keep food prices down.

Members of the Country Life Movement actually looked at several different aspects of rural society and contemplated the changes that they could make to modernize them. Commissioners developed and distributed surveys, conducted community meetings, and did extensive research into rural living. They evaluated rural transportation and determined that if rural roads were improved, farmers would be able to move their products to market more efficiently. They sought to bring extension agents and services to the farmers to help them in their agricultural practices. They wanted improvements in land grant colleges, and they even investigated the small country church and made suggestions how to make it more efficient.

Country Life members concluded that rural life indeed needed reform and declared their greatest objective was to improve rural education on the primary, secondary, and adult levels. In focusing their attention on education, the commission concluded that redirection

¹⁴ Ibid., 215.

was needed based on the findings “that education have relation to living; that the schools should express the daily life; that in rural districts they should educate by means of agriculture and country life subjects; that schools are held to be largely responsible for ineffective farming, lack of ideas, and the drift to town; that the school form a natural, organic community center; and that the teacher be a part of the community.”¹⁵ They agreed rural education was not only in need of reform, but was undoubtedly one of the major causes of the exodus of young rural Americans from the farm.

What the reformers found when they visited rural schools contrasted greatly from what they were used to seeing in the urban setting. Urban schools had undergone drastic changes and improvements at the end of the nineteenth century and were employing college-trained teachers. Trained professionals wrote and supervised urban school curriculums. Many urban school houses were modern, well lit, clean, and had all the latest furnishings and facilities. It is no wonder that A.C. Monahan, director of the Department of Education described rural schools this way. “They lacked intelligent and economical management, adequate supervision, and efficient teaching. . . . They were housed in uncomfortable buildings . . . without proper furniture or facilities for heating, ventilating, and lighting. . . . And they lacked adequate provisions for guarding the health and morals of the children as well as equipment for teaching.”¹⁶ Reformers also complained that the curriculum in the rural school was lacking and needed to be revived.

¹⁵ Ibid., 121-23.

¹⁶ A. C. Monahan, *The Status of Rural Education in the United States*, Bureau of Education Bulletin 15 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1913), 9.

The Country Life Commission and other members of the movement outlined specific changes they wanted to see implemented in rural school systems throughout the country.

First, they wanted consolidation of the numerous small, one-room school houses that dotted the landscape. They agreed that school children should be transported to a centrally located school house that would be modern and large enough to allow grading. Wilbert Anderson, writing in 1906 said, “The consolidated school has powerful influence for good: the children from different sections are educated together; their acquaintance is wide as the town; life for them is in a larger world; they escape the provincialism of the remote school district.

Children growing up with the town consciousness promise much for the uplift and enrichment of the community.”¹⁷ Reformers argued that improvement of the rural road systems they had also suggested would make consolidation a possibility.

Country Lifers wanted professionally trained teachers in these schools so that they could meet the high standards district professionals would eventually mandate. They found in their research that most teachers were untrained and unsupervised. Rural teachers arrived every two or three months and usually spent time establishing a set routine, trying to maintain discipline, reclassifying or regrouping students of all ages, and re-teaching the reading, writing, arithmetic, and civics, that his or her predecessor had taught. Urban teachers were generally educated in state teachers’ colleges and were up to date on all the newest techniques in education. Progressives believed the well-educated urban teachers had moved beyond the methods of rote memorization and recitation that rural teachers were still using.

¹⁷ Wilbert L. Anderson, *The Country Town: A Study of Rural Evolution* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1906), 253-54.

Finally, reformers wanted an expanded curriculum that would include vocational and physical education, art and music. They hoped that by teaching children about the fine arts they would instill a self-satisfaction that would keep them on the farm, and by training them in vocational programs like agriculture, they could teach young farmers-to-be improved farming techniques and instruct them in how to be better farmers than their fathers had been. With home economics added to the curriculum, future farm wives would learn how to be better homemakers. They also hoped that these children would take modern farm techniques home to their own parents and thus improve farming in the current generation. These reforms were geared to make life better for the farmer as well as the urban dweller who would eventually benefit from the farmer's new found efficiency.¹⁸

One major drawback to implementing curriculum reform for older students was the lack of rural high schools. In order to teach students adult skills, educators had to get them into a high school. Most country schools ended after the eighth grade. In 1910 there were only 406 high schools in Iowa.¹⁹ If there was a high school in the nearest town, a family could choose to send their students there. This might mean boarding the child in town during the week, and in the winter, for several weeks at a time. This was only an option if there was a high school close. In order to avoid this problem, some families found it necessary to move

¹⁸ David B. Danbom, "Rural Education Reform and the Country Life Movement, 1900-1920." *Agricultural History*, 53 (Spring 1979): 464. An article in the *Audubon County Journal* claims, "An education that takes a lady up to the study of Ceasar [sic], Old English History, or Latin, without a knowledge of the culinary department of a home is sadly lacking and deficient of the essential part of that preparation for life's work. And a boy that can orate about things he don't understand and don't know a strong, healthy grain when he sees it or the elements necessary to run down soil, that will invigorate a plant and produce profitable results, or know a degenerate animal from a perfect beast, is materially lacking in that part of his fitness for the warfare of life." "Demand for Teacher" *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 27 May 1913.

¹⁹ Schwieder, *Iowa, the Middle Land*, 123.

the whole family into town so the older children could attend school, inevitably moving that precious commodity, the farm family, off the farm and into the city.

Of all the findings made by the Country Life Commission, “the rural school was particularly important because it was a far more significant institution in the social life of the countryside than the urban school was in the social life of the city. The countryside had few social institutions, and this made those few which existed--such as the school--potentially very important as shaping influences for the community as a whole.” Clearly progressives could see that the rural school was the center for the neighborhood and without it, the rural community would suffer.²⁰

After much discussion and debate, the Commission decided that consolidation was the best answer to the problems of rural education. The Commission argued that consolidated schools would make better use of the finances available for education in the countryside, which would make it possible to hire better-trained teachers and utilize new curricula. One central school district would be much more efficient than several small ones. New school buildings would be up-to-date as well as comfortable, safe, and attractive and large enough to allow grading. These new buildings could also serve as meeting places and adult education facilities the Commission believed would improve rural neighborhoods. Finally, from the point of view of the reformers, professional educators, not uneducated, backward, local farmers would supervise and run a consolidated school.

Education reformers worked for the next several years to bring about the changes they saw as necessary for their cause. College and normal school teachers shared their ideas

²⁰ Danbom, “Rural Education Reform,” 467.

with education students. Philanthropic groups worked to inspire rural schools to change.

The news media tried to persuade rural people that the changes were necessary, and state and national political leaders pushed through some legislation that mandated the changes. The rural school reformers believed that without these changes the nation would suffer, and they warned that serious consequences would be the result if the changes were not made.²¹

Reformers hoped that the changes in rural schools would spill over into the community and the country as a whole and would transform all of rural society. Country Lifer Herbert Quick spoke for the whole movement when he said, “Every school when transformed will become the individual, the business, and the economic, as well as the social center of the community.”²²

The Country Life Movement, and the Commission appointed by Roosevelt in 1908 were successful in some of their efforts of reform. On a national level, rural school consolidation took place in the Eastern United States, rural transportation did improve in many areas of the country, and lawmakers passed some legislation requiring vocational training. In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which promoted extension education, and in 1917 the Smith-Hughes Act which funded agricultural and domestic science in the public schools passed. The Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916 expanded agricultural credit. While not all of these progressive actions can be directly attributed to the Country

²¹ Ibid., 472.

²² Herbert Quick, “The Awakening In the Rural Districts.” *LaFollett’s Weekly Magazine* 46 (18 November 1911): 7; William L. Bowers, “Country-Life Reform, 1900-1920: A Neglected Aspect of Progressive Era History.” *Agricultural History* 45 (Fall 1971): 211-21. For a thorough look at the Country Life Movement, see William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1890 – 1920* (Port Washington N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974). David B. Danbom gives a comprehensive look at the movement and its effects on agriculture in *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900 – 1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), and Wayne Fuller’s *The Old Country School* is an excellent treatment of the movement in regards to education in the Midwest.

Life Movement, clearly Progressives can take some credit for these accomplishments.²³

On a local level, the residents of Exira and the southern half of Audubon County were progressive in their thoughts and actions as well. Early in 1913, a year before Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, farmers in the area began the process of hiring an agricultural agent for the county. An article in the *Audubon County Journal* declared, "The day of slipshod farming is past. The value of land has risen so high that neither owner nor tenant can afford to use the methods which were good enough when it was worth \$50 per acre."²⁴ The article explained what an agricultural expert could do for local farmers. It discussed their methods and expertise, outlined the jobs an expert could be expected to do, including working with the county superintendent of schools to introduce agriculture study to the school's curriculum. The article explained how much the job would cost area farmers and what the county would be able to pay. The Exira Community Club "is able to provide a sum of \$500 per year for two years towards the cost of such a man. . . . From another source they believe themselves able to secure approximately \$500 additional per year for two years," the article stated. It went on to claim, "it is probable that the regular appropriation of \$500 per year for two years can be secured from the United States Government." Officials believed it would cost the county between \$2,500 and \$3,000 to hire an agent so farmers would be asked to give about two cents per acre towards the project. It was not clear if this would be a gift, or if the county would raise a tax to pay the fee.²⁵ In any case, the editor of the paper

²³ Bowers, "Country-Life Reform," 220.

²⁴ "Shall We Learn Better Methods?" *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 20 February 1913.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

strongly encouraged farmers to consider the progressive proposal and work toward its adoption.

In yet another plea that illustrated progressives' fear of the destruction of the family farm and Country Lifers' actions to achieve efficiency in agriculture, one week later, the *Journal* published an article that warned farmers, "Iowa is perhaps raising her banner crops. But land values have not yet begun to fall . . . since this comes when the yields begin to diminish. The history of farming in the United States is a tale of soil robbing and finally worn-out land. The soil has not yet been found that will stand more than thirty or forty years of present farming methods. In using present farming methods we are sinning against the soils, against our children and against our children's' children." Once again, the progressive editor of the paper admonished farmers that hiring an agriculture agent was the only way Audubon County farms would be saved.²⁶

Not only were Audubon County farmers looking for ways to improve their own practices, residents of the city of Exira were also attempting to bring progressive ideas to their community. Early in February of 1913, a group of local citizens tried to organize themselves into what they called the Audubon County Progressive League. In order to differentiate themselves from the political party, these residents advertised, "Progressives throughout the county are urgently invited not only to attend but to join with those who seek to keep alive and propagate progressive principles. It makes no difference whether one expects to vote the progressive ticket in the future or not. He may be either a republican or a democrat, but if he believes in progressive principles he is urgently invited to join the

²⁶ "The Farmer's Future," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 27 February 1913.

organization.”²⁷ The Progressive League was looking for ways to bring electricity to the community, to improve the roads leading in and out of Exira, and to enrich educational opportunities for area youth. Quickly this bi-partisan rhetoric changed and indeed the “League” began to be called a “party.” The call for local progressives to join together to form a political party soon quieted, but the progressive voice of the community, the *Audubon County Journal*, the town’s only newspaper, continued to tout the benefits of better roads and improved schools.²⁸

In Exira, residents were beginning to see the need for a new school. The building built in 1871 and expanded in 1880 was quickly becoming inadequate for the children of the district. In 1901 the district had added the third and fourth years of high school to the curriculum, and was teaching new subjects like solid geometry. In 1906, the school sent its first girls’ basketball team to the hardwood. Athletics quickly became a vital part of the school and it remained a defining element of the community. In 1904, the enrollment in the building was 319 students. In 1905, 275 students enrolled, and in 1906, the numbers were back up to 307. District officials needed to take action in order to continue to provide quality education for the students in the Exira district.²⁹

In June of 1913, members of the newly organized Exira Commercial Club announced that they would support a special election to decide if the town should build a new school building. And in August of that same year, the editor of the newspaper asked the question,

²⁷ “Will Meet Saturday,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 6 March 1913.

²⁸ “Electricity,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 20 March 1913; “Political Meeting,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 3 April 1913.

²⁹ Program Committee, *100 Years in Exira*, 71.

“Shall Exira Build a new School House?” The article announced that in two weeks, “The people of the Independent District of Exira will hold an election to decide whether the district school issue bonds in the sum of \$28,000 for the purpose of erecting a new school building.” A special committee of the Commercial Club met with the school board and presented the “facts” to the people of the district. They inspected the school and determined three reasons why building a new school was unavoidable. First, the old building had reached “such a state of decay that further repairs represent a waste of public money.” Second, the school was overcrowded and unsanitary. “Rooms which, according to the state inspection bureau are large enough to hold thirty to thirty-five pupils are in some cases holding fifty or more.” In 1913, the General Assembly of Iowa, in direct response to progressive demands for vocational training in high schools, had passed a bill that required agricultural education and home economics. The bill also required two years of normal training in all high schools as a solution to the dire need for rural school teachers. The state required district officials to begin the new classes by January of 1915. Thus, the committee gave the need for more classrooms to house the newly mandated subjects as their third reason. The committee concluded that if the community did not pass a bond issue for \$28,000 to build a new school building it would end up spending nearly that much just to repair and add to the old building.³⁰

The following week the *Audubon County Journal* presented its patrons with a new idea for consideration. The editor of the paper asked his readers to consider consolidation of the surrounding rural districts with the Exira district since the town was already contemplating building a new school. He explained, “The Independent District of Exira is

³⁰ “New School House Under Consideration,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 5 June 1913; “Shall Exira Build a New School House?” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 14 August 1913; Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 123.

considering the erection of a new building. The state aid, which will be secured in case such a step is taken, amounts to \$750 per year. But if a consolidation could be effected with three or more adjoining districts, the state aid which could be secured would be \$1,500 per year.”³¹ He added that the state aid would pay the yearly principle on the bond issue, and the “new building would in a true sense represent a gift from the state of Iowa to the district.”³²

The *Journal's* editor, W. J. Lancelot, presented his progressive views to not only the local citizens or Exira, but also to farmers living around Exira. He admitted that taxes might be a little higher for people in the neighboring districts, but their children would have a wonderful advantage if they could attend the Exira School. The district would provide free transportation so that these rural students could take advantage of a modern graded elementary school and the high school. Furthermore, rural students could take the newly mandated vocational classes and they could receive normal school training. He reminded patrons that this was not a new idea. Other states such as Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio had been establishing consolidated schools for several years and it was such a good idea, the state was offering to pay for it.³³

On 1 September of that year, voters went to the polls and cast a resounding 201 votes for the bond issue to build a new school. Only 11 voted against it, and just in time. On 5 September, when school started in Exira, the paper announced that six elementary students

³¹ “Consolidating Town and Country Schools,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 28 August 1913.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

did not have seats and nine high school students were without seating.³⁴ A week later, the paper published a front-page article that countered a rumor that had been circulating that the Exira High School was not state accredited. The paper stated, “ Our schools are in excellent condition and are competent to teach your children, youths, and young people to the fullest limit of advancement prior to Academic or College entree [sic].”³⁵

During the next several weeks the *Journal* published many articles on the front page that discussed school consolidation and gave facts about different districts that had successfully consolidated. One article extensively quoted Chester H. Gray of the *Country Gentleman*. Gray explained to farmers that by keeping their children in country schools they were jeopardizing the children’s future. He described a consolidated district in Illinois and told of all the advantages that the county received by consolidating their school. The value of the district was much higher than any other neighboring school district, and they were able to maintain their school much more inexpensively than a city school could. This district was in a rural area, not in a particular town. In another article, the author focused on several consolidated districts in Iowa. The article explained that more children were attending school since the consolidations took place, they were attending for longer terms, and it cost the district less per pupil. The article also discussed transportation and how each district transported its children to the centrally located school. Still another article a few weeks later

³⁴ “Large Majority for New School House,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 4 September 1913; Ibid, 5. The article covering the vote goes on to say that 84 “ladies” voted and “as remarkable as it may appear, everyone of them voted for the issue of the bonds. This again proves that our school affairs will be safe in the hands of the fair sex and we trust that at least two ladies will be placed on the School board at the nest election. Why not?” None were.

³⁵ “Exira High School on Accredited List,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 25 September 1913.

gave the same information about Buffalo Center, Iowa, the first consolidated school system in the state.³⁶

By February of 1914 Lancelot was making “A Plea for the Children Living in [the] Country” when he proclaimed the new school in Exira would bring better education to the children of the community and the children “roundabout” the city should take advantage as well. “If the welfare of the children should rule in this case, it is probable that little time would be lost in effecting a consolidation.”³⁷ He even explained how district officials could handle the hardest part of the consolidation equation, transportation. “One consolidated district in Iowa . . . say the cost per pupil is only forty cents a month more than before their change. Four routes for the conveyance of pupils were arranged by the board. One passed the home on each route of every farmer having children who attend school in the district. Home made covered light Rigs were made that cost not over \$50.00 each. Each has a capacity of about 20 students and the average cost per pupil per month is \$4.68 while under the old system it was 4.24 or 40 cents less per month.”³⁸ A week later he asked, “Shall we improve the roads and consolidate our schools?” He went on to explain to his readers the correlation between good transportation and good schools: counties with a poor road system were forced to continue to use antiquated one-room schools and children were unable to attend “larger, stronger graded high schools directed by a competent principal and corps of teachers.” In

³⁶ “Good Schools for Country Schools,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 11 September 1913; “Some Schools that are Consolidated,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 20 November 1913; “A Fair Analysis of the School Question,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 18 December 1913.

³⁷ “A Plea for Children Living in Country,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 19 February 1914.

³⁸ “Consolidated School Problem is Solved,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 26 February 1914.

counties with improved roads, the schools were more accessible, average attendance of students was better, schools were more efficient, and consolidation was possible.³⁹

By March, 1914 Lancelot was practically announcing consolidation when he proclaimed, "Exira with a new school house and everybody boosting for consolidation will mean much to adjacent districts that are favorable located to partake of our equipment and new studies as authorized by our legislature."⁴⁰ It appears Lancelot had decided the residents of Exira and the surrounding sub-districts would consolidate their schools as soon as the new building was finished. He believed Exira, with its generous water supply, improved cement sidewalks, soon to be installed electricity and new school building was a progressive dream come true and the residents of the surrounding township would soon flock to town to take advantage of all it had to offer.⁴¹

Unfortunately it appears that the editor of the paper was indeed "counting his chickens before they hatched," when in April of 1914 school administrators were unable to let a bid for the contract to build the new building. None of the bids came in even close to the \$28,000 dollars residents had agreed to spend. School officials met several times and finally decided they would have to ask the community for more money in order to complete the project. If the people wanted a building that would be the "pride of the community and a monument to the public spirit of the town," they would need to agree to spend another \$10,000.⁴² A new election date was set for 1 May 1914 and again voters went to the polls

³⁹ "Relationship Between Roads and Schools," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 19 March 1914.

⁴⁰ "New School House A living Issue," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 19 March 1914.

⁴¹ "A Banner Year For Exira is Certain," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 26 February 1914.

⁴² "School Bids Open Contract Not Let," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 2 April 1914.

and passed the bond, 134 for and 48 against it, not as overwhelmingly as the September vote, but still a strong showing. In his article announcing the election results, Lancelot proclaimed triumphantly, "Consolidation is coming, then we will see how much time and money have been wasted with our common school system, that in years past we have prized so highly. Without a question the milk of the cocoanuts is in the consolidation of the district schools."⁴³

On 14 May 1914 ground was finally broken for the new school, and by August the paper announced the building was coming along steadily. Lancelot appeared to have given up on the idea of consolidation because he did not mention it in the newspaper again in 1914 except in occasional cryptic comments. In August he stated, "It is safe to say that the day is past when their [children's] eyesight will be impaired and when their bodies will be stunted and misshapen as the result of attending school. The pity is that the doors of the splendid building should not be open to every child within hearing of its bell."⁴⁴ Not until January of 1915 was consolidation mentioned in the newspaper again when Lancelot asked, "We have been paying considerable attention to improvement of livestock and to the raising of pumpkins and potatoes. How about our children?"⁴⁵ Never in the paper was there any discussion of why consolidation was not a good idea for the residents of Exira and the surrounding districts. No letters to the editor appeared and no one wrote anything that contradicted the editor of the paper. Yet, consolidation did not take place in the Exira area during the progressive era.

⁴³ "School Tax Carried Very Satisfactorily," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 7 May 1914.

⁴⁴ "Work Being Pushed on New Building," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 20 August 1914.

⁴⁵ "About Consolidation of Schools Again," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 14 January 1915.

In March of 1915 the new school opened for business. On 17 June, State Superintendent of Schools, A. M. Deyoe dedicated the building in a ceremony that included several speeches from local educators and city leaders and music provided by the boys' and girls' choirs. That evening the largest class ever to graduate from Exira Independent School, three boys and nine girls, participated in the first commencement exercises held in the new building. The community was proud of its new school house. According to Ella Stearns, Audubon County school superintendent, the new building was "modern in every detail," and Deyoe proclaimed that it was "the best-appointed and equipped schoolhouse of its size in the state at that time."⁴⁶

The building, a model of progressive educational principles, featured steam heat, drinking fountains, a fire alarm system, thermostatic ventilation, and indoor plumbing. Most important of all, the gymnasium, domestic science classroom, and laboratory exemplified progressive ideas about safety, hygiene, and health. The domestic science classroom and the laboratory reflected progressive curricular ideas about improving rural lives through the application of scientific principles to home and farm life. High school students could now take advantage of vocational and normal training, the district could attract well-trained teachers to its facility, and all students in the community would be able to receive a comprehensive education in a comfortable and safe environment. The new Exira Independent School represented a distinct departure from what progressives in the community and in the

⁴⁶ Andrews, *History of Audubon*, 262-63.

nation saw as the inadequate facilities of the older country schools where rural students in the county attended.⁴⁷

While the Exira Independent District benefited from progressive ideology, the country schools around Exira changed very little over the next several decades. In 1910, there were forty-seven school building in the six townships that surrounded Exira. Ten years later only one of these schools was no longer open, however, Hamlin Township had built an additional school so the total number remained at forty-seven. In 1910 there were 1,779 students in rural Audubon County whom Iowa state law required because of their age to be enrolled in school. Only 974 were actually attending on a regular basis, an average of 55 percent in each township.⁴⁸ For example, in Oakfield township only 85 boys of 170 were attending school on a regular basis and only 93 of 153 girls attended. In Hamlin, similar numbers appear in the county superintendent's records: 69 of 146 boys and 101 of 163 girls attended regularly. These numbers can not be blamed on the condition of the country schools because the county superintendent that year rated 85 of the 111 schools in good condition, 19 in fair, and only 7 were rated poor. All but six of the schools had outhouses and every township reported their schools were open eight months of the year. The Exira Independent

⁴⁷ Ibid. Progressives and particularly members of the Country Life Movement recognized the importance of science and efficiency in agriculture and education. They believed that if farmers and their children did not learn and understand the importance of scientific principles they could not obtain the level of efficiency needed to keep up with expanding world markets. According to the CLM, farmers needed to listen to the botanist, entomologist, and chemist and their children needed to be taught the importance of science and efficiency in their schools in home economics and agriculture classes. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement*, 37-38.

⁴⁸ Iowa's mandatory attendance law, passed in 1902, required students between seven and sixteen to be in school on a regular basis for twenty-four consecutive weeks per year, beginning in September. Any student who lived more than two miles from the nearest school was exempt from this law.

School operated nine months out of the year and had 277 students in its district and 183 who were attending regularly, a slightly better 66 percent.⁴⁹

By 1920, the average length of time students in the southern townships attended school had dropped to seven and one half months. Eighty-one teachers taught in the fifty-six rural schools, demonstrating that teacher-turnover was high. The numbers of country students began a steady decline while the number of students in Exira began to climb. The total number of students between seven and sixteen was 1,245 with 771 attending on a regular basis. In Exira, while records do not show how many students were actually attending in comparison to how many were required to attend, there was a total number of 360 students in the district compared to the 238 in 1910. More importantly, the total number of high school students had risen to 116 compared to the 42 in 1910.⁵⁰

These numbers continued to shift with more and more students attending the school in Exira and less going to country school. By 1940, there were 710 students in rural districts with 560 attending school regularly. The percentage of students attending had risen to 79, but by that time, 116 students from rural school districts were attending the Exira School. These students' home districts were required to pay tuition for their high school students and 108 of the total number were in the upper grades.⁵¹ Trends in education were changing and rural parents, in spite of their earlier lack of interest in consolidation, must have been thinking

⁴⁹ Ella Stearns, "Law For Compulsory Education," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 14 January 1915, 5; Annual Report of Country School Superintendents, Microfilm roll 29, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, (hereafter SHSIDM). No criteria is given for how school houses were rated.

⁵⁰ Annual Report of Country School Superintendents, roll 38, SHSIDM.

⁵¹ In 1911, the Iowa General Assembly passed legislation that required school districts without high schools to pay tuition for any student who wanted to attend high school. By 1934, there were more than 950 high schools in the state. Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 123.

about the benefits of free education in a graded system with a high school and district-supported transportation.⁵²

The Superintendent's report from 1950 shows that 199 students residing in the country were attending town schools in the lower half of Audubon County. Exira Independent School was no doubt benefiting from the influx of these students, 109 of whom were attending Exira High School. It is no surprise therefore that the residents of southern Audubon County began, once again to think about consolidation.⁵³ As had been the case 1915, there was very little discussion and hardly any disapproval of the topic, and school patrons moved quickly toward a more progressive education system for the community of Exira. This time however, rural residents joined their neighbors in the "city" and together they voted for a reorganization of rural districts and a consolidation with the school in Exira.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century the progressive movement in the United States, and particularly the Country Life Movement working in rural America attempted to bring great change to the country by bringing urban ideas to rural communities and schools. Many small communities were willing to adapt their ideas when it suited them, as was the case in Exira when the citizens united to build a new school building that would provide modern educational objectives for their children. When it came to the consolidation of rural and town districts however, citizens of both the town and the countryside balked. Farmers were convinced their schools could still provide an education that was sufficient for their children, they resented their tax dollars being used to support a school district they had

⁵² The data from the 1930 superintendents report was available but the numbers could not have been accurate when compared to the data from 1920 and 1940. They showed that almost 100 percent of all students were attending school on a regular basis and it is doubtful this could have been the case. Annual Report of Country School Superintendents, roll 66, SHSIDM.

⁵³ Annual Report of Country School Superintendents, roll 85, SHSIDM.

little control over, and they were concerned that transporting their children to the nearest community school might not be safe or efficient. These beliefs held by rural residents, along with town residents, assurance they could still support their own schools, kept most small districts in Iowa from seriously considering consolidation. Perhaps the complacency and lack of strife during this early movement made the later changes easier for citizens to accept. In both the 1910s and the 1950s, the residents of rural Audubon County and Exira were able to hold onto their community identity, first when rural schools remained in the country and Exira built her own new school, and later when the residents of both areas pulled together to form a new and stronger community.

CHAPTER 3

Creating a New Community: School Reorganization in the 1950s

On the evening of 23 November 1959, small groups of people, some on foot, others by car, traveled to the new high school building in Exira, Iowa for a formal dedication ceremony postponed two weeks earlier by snow, ice, and high winds. The new building they dedicated and toured that night was a solid brick structure with large classrooms and hallways, natural lighting provided by large windows, a modern science laboratory and home economics department, a spacious gymnasium, and a “cafetorium” that school officials could use both to serve the hot lunch program and as an auditorium for concerts and school plays. The dedication service began with a band concert, followed by a short presentation by Superintendent Oren Brinkley. After Brinkley’s remarks several other community leaders shared their thoughts and feelings about the new school. Larry Jessen, student council president, spoke on behalf of the student body. Exira native, Congressman Ben F. Jensen, took his turn at the podium as did Henry Beck, school board president, and Thomas Payne, county school board member and chairman of the Citizen’s Committee which had been the main promoter of reorganization and a strong advocate for the new building. Following the presentations, citizens toured the new building while the local P.T.A. treated them to coffee and refreshments. Touted as a “proud evening” for Exira, the dedication represented the culmination of five years of effort on the part of local advocates to address the declining status of rural education in the area surrounding this small town. The new era, brought about by the reorganization of the Exira school and its surrounding rural school districts, and the new school building, marked the end of the country school era for the ruralites living on farms around the village.¹ Even though the individual identities of the rural neighborhoods

¹ “New School Dedicated Monday Eve.,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 26 November 1959; History Book Committee, *Quasquicentennial: Proud of our Past, Planning for Our Future* (N.P.:N.P., 1982), 39-40.

changed, the new district created a stronger sense of community and the new building provided the citizens with an enduring symbol of their unity and independence.

Iowa is a place of small towns and rural communities like Exira. In 1957, more than 50 percent of the population of the state was “rural” and less than thirty of Iowa’s “cities” had more than 10,000 people.² Iowa is a traditional place, where generations of ruralites have lived in close proximity to one another and come to know each other’s families as their own. Iowans are attached, not only to the land upon which they live, but to the common institutions that bind them to their rural neighbors and form, not only shared bonds of community, but a shared identity and space. Exirans are no exception. They have long been proud of their community, its history, and its future, as evidenced by their commitment to its survival. The yearly Fourth of July celebration remains the largest of its kind in the area with a carnival, annual class reunions, and a parade that lasts more than two hours. Locals maintain a historical society and museum, and the Exira Community Club, a civic organization formed during the first decade of the century, remains extremely active today. Above all, Exirans are proud of their schools.

During the twentieth century, several episodes of school consolidation have threatened most small Iowa communities and their most defining institution: the local school. Each time consolidation became an issue for rural Iowans to consider, three factors proved to be the focus of their discussions. First, farmers were concerned that their property taxes would go up, second, rural residents wanted to keep their children close and did not want them to spend excessive amounts of time riding a school bus, and third, Iowans, both in the

² C. O. Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization: Policies and Procedures* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 178. In 1950 the population of Exira peaked at 1,129, and 59% of the population of Audubon County lived in the country, History Book Committee, *Quasquicentennial*, 62.

countryside and in small communities, did not want to lose control of their local school districts. Displaying a common human response when outsiders attacked and threatened their identity, ruralites, in communities such as Exira, have fought to defend the rural school from the designs of education reformers and state lawmakers. “Iowa farm people don’t cotton much to school reorganization,” claimed the *Wallaces’ Farmer and Iowa Homestead* in 1950, “At least to the kind that would raise their taxes and move their schools farther from home.”³ While educators and lawmakers have claimed reorganization was necessary because the majority of schools in Iowa were too small, school size was not a major concern for rural parents.

According to a poll in the 15 April 1950 issue of *Wallaces’ Farmer*, 58 percent of farmers who responded to the poll believed the size of their high school was “just right” while only 29 percent thought their school was “too small.” A large majority, 76 percent, believed their children should not spend more than one and one-half hours a day on the bus. Of those polled, however, 50 percent thought they would like a bigger school if it could be as close as the one their children already attended, and 59 percent said they would like a bigger school if it didn’t raise their taxes. Clearly, school size was not as important to Iowans as convenience, cost, and control. Farmers opposed reorganization if it meant closing their own schools but took a different stand if their local schools were the ones being enlarged. In response to the *Wallaces’* poll, one Audubon County resident said, “Reorganization is the only way—but these small towns hate to give up their high schools.”⁴

³ “Don’t Close Our High School,” *Wallaces’ Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 15 April 1950, n.p.

⁴ Ibid. In 1950, Audubon County had five high schools.

In the 1950s, school size was an important part of the state education leaders' argument for reorganization. In 1958, Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction, Paul Johnston said, "We believe school districts should have a minimum of 600 pupils but 900 to 1,000 pupils would give a better size system."⁵ According to another 1958 poll in *Wallaces' Farmer*, 72 percent of readers believed a school enrollment of 300 or less would "likely provide the best education" for their children. The remaining 28 percent believed a school of 400 or more would be better.⁶ For rural Iowans however, taxes and local control remained the biggest concern.

Rural school reorganization during the middle part of the twentieth century was a nation-wide movement and Exira's experiences were typical, and illustrative of this struggle. By 1921, the state of Iowa had removed all incentives to encourage rural school consolidation brought about by the progressives during the first two decades of the century and thus such consolidation was no longer viable. World War I brought prosperity to farming communities, but when the war ended, so did the financial boom. Farmers began to experience a depressed economy much sooner than did urban areas. The rapid decline in farm income made it extremely difficult for farmers to pay their taxes in consolidated districts, and they were becoming more aware of their grossly disproportionate share of the cost to keep these schools open.⁷ In 1915 Exirans had shown their progressive spirit with the building of their modern school house, thus they were prepared to move forward with reorganization when it, once again, became an issue in the 1950s. Had they not been

⁵ "Move Continues to Larger Schools," *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 17 May 1958, n.p.

⁶ "What Size of High School?" *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 6 September 1958, 78.

⁷ National Commission on School District Reorganization, *Your School District: The Report of The National Commission of School District Reorganization* (Washington D.C.: The Department of Rural Education, National Education Association of the United States, 1948), 170.

successful in 1915, it is possible they would have been forced to make changes that were even more drastic thirty-five years later when the next movement for consolidation began.

The United States was a different place at the end of World War II and in the decade that followed and education was a target for change. At the beginning of the Second World War, live births in the country were less than 2.5 million, but the birthrate took a dramatic upswing and by 1947, it had reached 3.5 million. Although experts predicted the birth rate would fall during the 1950s, it remained high. By 1957, and for the four years preceding, the number of live births exceeded four million.⁸ The country was dealing with the specter of atomic weapons. The space race and a battle for scientific supremacy were on the horizon. Vocational education became part of most rural school's curriculum during the Progressive Era reform, but by the 1950s, educators were more concerned that students have the opportunity to study math and the sciences. According to Ray Bryan, Iowa State College specialist in education, "The need for scientists and engineers is great and may get greater." Bryan believed high school curriculums should offer four years of science and at least three years of math.⁹ With this new and concentrated interest in science and the surge of population, educators, parents, and legislators across the nation believed they needed to make drastic changes in education across the country.

According to the newly formed Commission on School District Reorganization, a committee created by the American Association of School Administrators to investigate reorganization across the country, rural administrators needed to reorganize small districts, which they characterized as "outdated and outmoded" into "effective and efficient

⁸ American Association of School Administrators, Commission on School District Reorganization, *School District Organization: Report* (Washington D.C.: American Association of School District Administrators, 1958), 13.

⁹ "Give Them a Good Education," *Wallaces Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 6 September 1958, 38.

administrative units.” The national commission charged that rural districts had “barren, meager, insipid curriculums,” were unable to attract quality teachers and administrators, and lacked the ability to build better school plants. The commission also suggested that rural districts wasted manpower by having small classes, spending “unreasonably high” amounts of money on each student, inefficiently using financial resources, having poor building locations and lacking necessary, “specialized educational services.” Finally, the commission charged that small districts unequally distributed the burden of school support and utilized “cumbersome, complex formulas for distributing school aid.”¹⁰

These needs were especially obvious in Iowa, which ranked eighth in the nation for total numbers of school districts with 4,891 districts in 1945. By 1954, there were still 4,417 districts, a loss of only 474, or 9.7 percent.¹¹ Most of these districts were rural, and many of them did not maintain a school building, but instead, tuitioned their students into a nearby district, making them purchasers rather than providers of education.¹² In 1945 there were still 1,029 children enrolled in rural country schools in Audubon County.¹³

In order to understand how the quantity of school districts had grown to such numbers by 1945, and be better able to appreciate the intricate problems of reorganization in the 1950s, it is important to understand how education began in Iowa, and how the numbers of small rural districts grew. In 1847, when Iowa was less than a year old, the first school inspectors began dividing their counties up into school districts. Within two years, they had

¹⁰ American Association of School Administrators, *School District Organization: Report*, 23.

¹¹ Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 11.

¹² American Association of School Administrators, *School District Organization: Report*, 94-95.

¹³ History Book Committee, *Quasquicentennial*, 62.

organized 3,200 individual districts. In 1858, legislators passed a law that created township districts, which reduced the number of districts to 932. Because townships were large in area, and county school officials did not provide transportation until much later, youngsters could not walk to a single school house in each township, so authorities once again divided the individual districts into several smaller, sub-districts. By 1905, the number of township districts had only increased to 1,182 but the number of sub-districts within each township district had jumped to 9,403. This meant that the state of Iowa potentially could have more than 9,000 small one-room schools. This number did not include the school districts in most incorporated cities and towns. In 1858, and again in 1860, the Iowa legislature enacted new laws that made it possible for towns and villages as small as 300 persons to have their own school districts. The number of these districts rose to more than 400.¹⁴

Progressive Era legislation brought about the consolidation of many of these small township sub-districts, so that by the 1920-21 school year there were 440 consolidated units in the state. The majority of these consolidated districts included a town or village attendance center, but most still had very small enrollments. In 1920, only seventy-three districts in Iowa had an enrollment of more than 300 students. Nearly all of these consolidated districts had both elementary and secondary schools, and transported more than half of their students into the district. This era of change came to a complete halt during the 1920s and 1930s because of the Great Depression and, by 1940, there was even a loss of a few of these newly constructed districts.¹⁵

¹⁴ Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 179-80.

¹⁵ Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 180.

By the 1943-44 school year there were 4,856 school districts in Iowa. More than three-fourths of these were one-teacher districts, and the average daily attendance in these one-teacher districts was just slightly more than ten students. More than two-thirds of the high schools in the state maintained an average daily attendance of less than one hundred students, and one fourth had less than fifty.¹⁶ In 1945, there were approximately 250 students attending the thirty-four country schools in the Exira area.¹⁷

Upon reviewing these numbers, reformers and lawmakers were sure that the only way to reduce the numbers of small districts in Iowa was to enact new legislation that would force more consolidation. Reformers began to use the modern term “reorganization” instead of the outdated and emotionally laden “consolidation,” and education leaders and lawmakers tried to focus on modernity rather than a loss of tradition. Educators began to consider the benefits that larger school districts would bring to rural areas. The major problem they saw was the need for equalization of educational opportunities for youth in rural communities and neighborhoods with those of urban areas. Iowa’s rural education system had changed very little since early settlement and it was no longer sufficient to satisfy the educational needs of its students. Leaders in education reform believed they needed to seek reform in almost every area of the system, administration, supervision, finances, methods of instruction, curriculum, and personnel.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Historical Program Committee, *100 Years in Exira, 1857-1957: Centennial Celebration Book* (Np:Np, 1957), 71.

¹⁸ M. L. Cushman, *An Analysis of Legislation for School District Reorganization in the Midwest* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1948), n.p.

According to these leaders, three major tendencies in consolidation appeared and persisted during the one hundred years since settlement, and reduced education to the level of deficiency that existed in the 1940s. First, all efforts to improve education for rural Americans had been disorganized, temporary, and provided only a patchwork approach that in almost every case had failed. Second, reorganizational attempts to solve the deficiencies in the district system had resulted in a simple change to some other political structure such as a township or county system. Third, since the turn of the century, the movement of change in school districts had been toward the direction of the community unit. Educators in the 1940s saw these measures as temporary, and an ineffective way to bring quality education to rural areas.¹⁹ These professionals believed that there had to be standardized change. New legislation appeared to be the avenue for this needed modification. Older consolidation laws followed the procedure of local petition, local vote, and local determination of legal boundaries. Reformers believed that local control led to disorganization and caused communities to make decisions based on emotion and community sentiment rather than on better education and benefits for rural school students. Rural Iowans however, were not ready to give up the control they had over their schools and they were concerned that reorganization would bring a bigger tax burden than they were willing or able to bear.

Because Iowa reformers could not begin the transformation of rural education until they determined where rural schools and communities stood, they planned to survey all the districts in the state. They also believed that they could give locals a sense of ownership in the reorganization movement if they turned to the small community for help. The idea was to have each county board organize meetings in their county and complete surveys to find out

¹⁹ Ibid., n.p.

what the local patrons wanted and needed. The superintendent of the Board of Public Instruction sent out pamphlets to all county superintendents to guide them through these meetings. The pamphlets addressed several questions legislators believed they would need answered to determine the desires of patrons, but more importantly, they hoped the surveys would identify the status of each local district. State Board Superintendent Agnes Samuelson believed there were five major issues that local district leaders needed to address. These five issues included, how developing local systems should be organized and administered in order to make education effective, economical, and equal; the need for the most modern and up-to-date school plant that would be sanitary and have sufficient modern instructional apparatus; a curriculum that was sensitive to the needs of young and old; a competent and inspiring teacher in every classroom; and finally, a public that was informed and responsive to the accomplishments and needs of the school.²⁰

The information Samuelson asked local district officials to collect during these meetings included the adequacy of the current education program, average daily attendance of pupils, the valuation of all combined property, an inventory of buildings and equipment in the district, natural community areas, road conditions and access to transportation, economic factors, and other information that would show how close local district were to meeting minimum standards. These surveys were voluntary, however, and since lawmakers provided no funds to finance them, and county superintendents had no deadlines, very few were ever

²⁰²⁰ Agnes Samuelson, *Better Schools for Iowa: A Guide for Study Groups* (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1938), 4-13.

completed. Thus state officials did not receive the feedback from local educators and citizens they needed to determine local school district needs.²¹

In 1945, lawmakers passed new legislation in order to begin the process of reorganization throughout the state. The requirements for developing reorganization plans, however, were complicated. County boards had to confer with the State Department of Public Instruction and make sure local plans conformed to state plans. If there was local controversy, they submitted the plan to the state board, which made the final decision. County officials submitted and voted on the plan one section at a time, thus the local voters did not always see the big picture for reorganization in their area before they voted on its individual sections. When the vote came to the local patrons, the state required a sixty percent majority in each of the affected districts, and, if the plan failed, officials could not submit a new plan for two years.²²

The only significant changes districts made between 1945 and 1947 came about under the old reorganization laws already in existence. State and local officials eliminated more than 140 districts during the two-year period these laws existed. Most of these were very small districts, however. One of the plans involved the consolidation of twenty-nine rural districts and one independent district and in the end, only included a little more than 1,200 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade.²³

In 1947, lawmakers added several amendments to the legislation to correct the weaknesses found in the 1945 law. They required county boards to begin the fact-finding

²¹ Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 181.

²² *Ibid.*, 181-82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 185.

surveys within six months after the date of the amendment; however, there was no date set for completion. Lawmakers also suspended all existing laws that provided for school district consolidation, reorganization, mergers, or boundary changes. They went on to change the procedure for voting on a proposed amendment by requiring a bare majority instead of the 60 percent previously required. Local citizens had to approve any reorganization proposal that included more than five districts by at least 80 percent per district, and any district that did not garner a majority could not be included in the new district. The stipulation that district citizens could not vote on a defeated proposal again for two years was repealed, and the state gave each county \$500 to help defray the expense of the surveys and plan development. Even after these changes, very few districts made progress towards reorganization. How serious state educators were about reorganization is unclear. On the one hand, they were spending a great deal of time and money creating legislation to encourage, and in fact, force counties to begin the process, but on the other, their laws continued to make counties responsible for initiation of district reorganization. Furthermore, while the laws continued to change they did not become any easier to follow.²⁴

After the legislature suspended all the pre-1945 laws in 1947, very few local districts made new reorganization proposals. Educators developed several new standards during this period however, including the recommendation that any newly established district be a twelve-grade unit with at least one teacher per elementary grade and between twelve and fifteen teachers in each secondary unit. These standards also encouraged new districts to have at least 600 hundred students in twelve grades.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 182.

²⁵ Ibid., 186.

In 1951 legislators added more amendments to the reorganization laws. These changes included a requirement of county boards to prepare a tentative plan of reorganization even if the county was not taking any actual measures toward reorganization. Legislators also repealed the 1947 suspension of all previously enacted legislation regarding consolidation, reorganization, boundary changes, and mergers, because some districts had been using these laws and the suspension brought their plans to a halt. Election procedures changed again to require only a favorable majority vote in each district. If the county requested, the new law required the State Board to prepare a reorganization plan with suggestions and recommendations for county superintendents.²⁶

In 1953, lawmakers finally made sweeping changes in education legislation. In the new laws, they repealed all previously accumulated statutes that defined school district boundaries. The 1953 laws permitted five different types of districts: community, independent, township, consolidated, and rural independent districts. The community school districts included all reorganized units established after 1953. The independent districts included city, town, and village schools not yet consolidated. More than one fourth of these districts did not operate a high school. Township districts usually had boundaries that were coterminous with civil townships and only had an elementary school. Curiously, a fifth of these 932 township districts did not even operate a school building. Their only function was to maintain a three-member school board whose sole responsibility was to levy tax money to pay for tuition into a neighboring district. Consolidated districts were independent but had to contain more than sixteen sections of land. Almost all of these districts operated both a high

²⁶ Ibid., 183.

school and an elementary school and were products of the Progressive Era consolidation movement. The most numerous of all these types of districts were the rural independent districts that pioneers had established during settlement as sub-districts in the townships. These schools almost exclusively operated only one-teacher schools and, like the township districts, many did not operate a school; during the 1953-54 school year, 1,464 of the 2,590 rural independent districts in Iowa were functioning as a sending district only.²⁷

The 1953 legislation made major changes in state and county level administration as well. It established a nine-member board of education that could make and change state policy. The same legislation changed the way the superintendent of the state board was chosen. Instead of appointment by the governor, the State Board of Education now chose its executive officer. Each county elected a five-member board of education and they in turn appointed the county superintendent. The county superintendent acted as a liaison between the state board and local districts, except in independent and consolidated districts, which operated their own high school and employed their own superintendents.²⁸

Legislators revised the school reorganization laws in 1953 as well. For the first time they designated all new districts as community school districts. All new districts had to have at least 300 pupils, although where population scarcity made this a problem, the State Superintendent could make an exception and grant permission for the creation of a smaller district. District officials now had to submit their reorganization plans to the State Superintendent within ten days of the county's approval. Officials could not bring a proposal to the vote of the people without the approval of the county board. If the proposal affected

²⁷ Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 179.

²⁸ Ibid.

two districts, local officials had to collect at least ten signatures from legal voters in each district in order to submit the petition. If there were fewer than ten voters, a majority had to sign the petition. This suggests that some of these districts were very small. Where more than two districts were involved, the procedure became even more complicated. Officials had to submit a petition with the signatures of at least one-third of the voters in the involved districts, and if the district plan did not follow county plans, officials had to amend the county version before it could go forward. The new law required district officials to hold a public hearing on the proposal, and if local school patrons objected to the proposal, submit a written or oral objection at a public meeting. The county board had the final say on the approval of the proposal. If the board amended it, they had to hold a second hearing on the new proposal. If the proposed new district contained property in two different counties, members from both county boards had to be present and agree on the proposal. This happened in the case of the Elk Horn-Kimballton district. Elk Horn was in Shelby County and Kimballton was in Audubon County. These two communities were both predominantly Danish settlements, however, so the residents likely shared a kinship that they wanted to maintain. Members of the Danish neighborhood were clearly as interested in maintaining their sense of place and belonging as they were in bettering the education system for their children.²⁹

Further amendments to the reorganization legislation in 1953 included the time limit of thirty days when the election for the proposal must take place. Legislation required a favorable majority in 75 percent of the component districts and no component district that did not have a favorable majority could be included. In addition, legislation mandated a separate

²⁹ Ibid., 183.

vote from any district that contained a city, town, or village with more than 200 people. Any previously consolidated district required a separate vote. If a city, town, or village was included in the vote, at least one member of the new five-member board had to be a farmer. Reorganization laws were complicated and difficult to understand. The public was confused and intimidated by the suggestion of reorganization. Public education had always been a matter of local control, and up until this last attempt at reorganization, the state and federal governments had tried to maintain a hands-off policy.³⁰

Because, until the 1950s, local districts were responsible for educating their own youth, both organizationally and fiscally, upper levels of government tried to stay as uninvolved as possible. Today, the local district and the state divide funding costs for Iowa schools almost equally. This was not always the case. Until 1946, the local district bore almost the entire cost (98 percent) of public education, and funding came from local property taxes. Some state aid for special purposes, federal aid for vocational programs, and interest on permanent school funds made up the remaining 2 percent.³¹ The obligation on the local taxpayer brought not only a huge burden, but also a strong sense of ownership and a desire for control.

The financial burden on the farmer was far greater than on the town dweller, and this was one of the biggest obstacles in reorganization. In this latest move toward education

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ National Commission on School District Reorganization, *Your School District*, 172. In 1945, Iowa lawmakers passed legislation to appropriate \$3,530,000 annually for state aid to schools. This included \$2,000,000 to subsidize districts for transportation costs, \$1,000,000 for supplementary aid to poorer school districts, \$500,000 as an agricultural land tax credit. This credit was similar to the homestead tax credit and was intended to help farmers pay the increasing taxes levied to pay for school improvement. The money was used to keep agricultural land at a 15 mill school fund levy limit. Finally \$30,000 went to schools to help them provide for handicapped children. This amount fell far short of the \$12,000,000 recommended by the State School Code Commission. "Whittle Down Aid to School," *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 21 April 1945, n.p.

reform, local farmers believed they stood to lose in two ways. Not only would they sacrifice their exclusive and convenient country school, but they would also have to pay the bulk of the cost for the larger reorganized district. In rural Iowa, the assessed value of real property per child was 2.98 times as great in farming areas as it was in non-farming areas.³² The tax rate levied on farm and non-farm real estate in the 1940s and 1950s was the same, and property tax made up almost the entire funding for the local school. Thus, the farm population was paying approximately four times more for each of its children to go to school than the non-farm population. This meant that farmers were paying enough land tax to support the education of their own children and more than 60 percent of the cost of education of non-farm children as well. It is not hard to understand why farmers were likely to oppose school reorganization.³³

By 1954, the state was still only providing 12.3 percent of the cost of education per child, which amounted to about \$90 per average daily attendance elementary student and \$145 per average daily attendance high school student. Nationally the average state contribution was 41 percent.³⁴ In order to qualify for the new state money, however, legislation required elementary districts to levy a 7-mill tax, consolidated districts a 10-mill tax and independent districts a 17-mill tax. Lawmakers provided no special provisions for districts with very small enrollments.³⁵ While farmers were willing to accept financial aid

³² Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 184; "Move Continues to Larger Schools," *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 17 May 1958, n.p.

³⁵ Fitzwater, *School District Reorganization*, 184. A mill is a monetary unit equal to 1/1000 of a U.S. dollar or 1/10 of a cent. In other words, a 7-mill levy would be a tax of 7 cents per one thousand dollars of land value. For example, a 160 acre farm valued at \$100 per acre would bring \$112 tax.

from the state to help with their tax expenses, they were still not willing to give up their control. In 1958, Roland Penningroth of rural Clinton County said, “More state aid would be fine, but we still want to keep local control of the school.”³⁶ Lawmakers were slowly loosening the state’s purse strings for education, but they clearly favored larger consolidated districts.

On 11 November 1954, the *Audubon County Journal* published the results of a nationwide study conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) that concluded that educational facilities were not keeping pace with the increase in the nation’s population or in national income. School districts were short almost 250,000 classrooms and would need approximately 100,000 new ones every year. One in every five school buildings were over half a century old, too few teachers were being trained and too many were leaving the profession for higher paying jobs, and tax support was not increasing fast enough. The study also claimed three times more children would enter elementary school in 1952 than had in 1947. NAM recommended to local districts a change in property assessment and wider tax equalization, more state aid for poorer districts, and enlisting businessmen on school boards who could help solve financial and other school problems.³⁷

By January of 1955, the Exira school board had begun conducting the surveys advocated by the Board of Public Instruction fifteen years earlier. The Exira School Board finally realized it needed to make some changes in the schools in southern Audubon County. The board pointed out that the advantages to consolidation included better school facilities

³⁶ “Move Continues to Larger Schools,” *Wallaces’ Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 17 May 1958, n.p.

³⁷ “Public Schools Need More Aid, Study Says,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 11 November 1954; When Audubon County rural schools opened in August of 1955, there were 56 schools in operation and the superintendent was still looking for two more teachers to fill all of the positions, “56 Rural Schools to Enroll 800 Pupils,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 25 August 1955.

for the majority of the area students, better educational materials such as modern visual aids (movies, slide projectors, maps and charts), better trained and qualified teachers, large enough groups of children for age-specific classrooms, and rural representation on community schools boards. In November of 1955, the *Journal* reported that the county schools had received record amounts of state aid for schools; county officials received almost \$73,000 for distribution to the fifteen independent, consolidated, and township school districts in the county. The article further explained that the total amount of state aid for schools in Iowa was still below 15 percent while forty-eight states paid an average 40 percent of all school costs. Local County Superintendent, Noble Gividen told the public, until Iowa's school were reorganized into larger units with a greater tax base for each, state aid would not increase.³⁸

By 1955, most Exirans and their neighbors in the countryside were not opposed to reorganization, in fact, they welcomed it. There were many reasons for this new outlook on school consolidation. In the 1920s, there were few options for farmers who wanted to provide secondary educations for their children. District supported transportation was still not available in many rural areas, so either they had to find transportation into town, or they had to board their children with family or friends who lived in town. The only other option they had was to move the whole family into the nearest village. In 1950, many rural students had already been attending high school in town, so sending all of their children on the bus, then, did not present a major change for rural families once buses were available for all students living in the country.

³⁸ "Audubon County Schools Receive Record State Aid," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 10 November 1955.

The citizens of Exira began their transition towards reorganization in 1955 when they formed a citizen's committee to oversee the coming changes and inform the rest of the community concerning reorganization. Thomas Payne, a lifelong resident of the town, headed the group. Payne was the son of Dr. R. H. Payne who had served the community as its only physician since 1924.³⁹ The younger Payne was himself, a respected member of the community. A member of the Audubon County Board of Education, he had the knowledge needed to make decisions regarding the school system. Payne's wife, Beverly Nymand Payne, was a teacher in the Exira Elementary School, which likely gave her husband even more insight and credibility with locals.

By October, the County Board of Education had drawn a tentative map of the two new school districts which would contain most of the rural schools in the county. To the north, the Audubon Community School District would include the Audubon school, the Gray and Viola consolidated schools, all country schools in Lincoln, Cameron, Viola, Douglas, Leroy, and Melville townships, six country schools from Sharon Township, six from Hamlin Township, and three from Greeley Township. The Exira Community School district would contain the Exira School, seven rural schools in Oakfield Township, one rural school in Sharon Township, six rural schools in Greeley Township, three rural schools in Hamlin Township, and all the rural schools in Exira and Audubon townships. Two rural school districts in Oakfield Township voted to move into the Elk Horn District even though that district was in Shelby County rather than Audubon. These were residents who considered their Danish heritage more important than their county residence. Members from each school

³⁹ "Community to Study Area for Community School Reorganization," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal* 3 March 1955; History Book Committee, *Quasquicentennial*, 199-20.

district had their say in the plan to divide the county, however, citizens from every township and school district had to vote on and approve the reorganization plan before officials could continue with their actions.⁴⁰

Payne and the Citizen's Committee worked diligently towards reorganization. The committee divided itself into several sub-committees including education, transportation, enrollment, building and sites, and finance. Each of these committees reported to the whole group on a regular basis. Eight months after its inception, the Citizens' Committee presented County Superintendent Gividen with petitions containing over 1,100 signatures of residents who favored reorganization.⁴¹ On 14 December, county education officials held a hearing concerning the proposed district boundaries. The officials received forty-nine written objections to the boundaries but only twenty-nine people showed up at the hearing to object. Most of these came from Greeley and Oakfield townships and were probably arguments to send students to either the Elk Horn district or the nearby, Anita School district. Officials scheduled a second hearing with the proposed changes for 4 January 1956, and approved the plan at that meeting. They then scheduled a special school election to accept the new Exira Community School District for 2 February 1956.⁴²

For two weeks in January the *Audubon County Journal* ran a series of questions locals were asking school officials about reorganization. According to Gividen, the most frequently asked question about reorganization was, why now? Gividen gave several

⁴⁰ "Two School Districts is Plan, County Board," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 6 October 1955; *1920 Atlas and Farmers' Directory of Audubon Count.,* (Des Moines: Anderson Publishing Co., 1920).

⁴¹ "Over 1,100 Sign Petition for Reorganization," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 24 November 1955.

⁴² "County Board of Education Changes Boundaries in Exira Community School Proposal," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 December 1955.

reasons. He told the public that Iowa had one of the most inefficient education systems in the country; about 50 percent of Iowa students attended 100 school districts while the remaining 50 percent attended 3,900 school districts. He went on to say that legislative trends and tax laws were changing so that reorganization was more affordable and desirable. He claimed competition for students between neighboring high schools had become fierce and in fact, at least twelve different school districts were trying to recruit students in Audubon County. If the local districts did not move fast there would not be enough students left to support a high school. Finally he said “the most important reason of all was to provide equal educational opportunity for all children, town and country alike. It is a simple fact,” he continued, “our present setup does not bring all the services to all the children. Rural schools can become better schools under a reorganized district where supervision can be improved and additional services and materials made available.” Another question locals asked was how will rural citizens have a voice in a reorganization? Gividen assured them that the new five-member board would be elected by people “at-large” and that according to law, there had to be at least one farmer on the board, although all five could be farmers. The Citizen’s Committee on this issue assured the public that “the whole idea was a ‘Community School.’” That meant, they said, that the new district would strengthen cooperation between town and country.⁴³

The next week another list of questions appeared in the paper. This time the community asked, “When we vote on reorganization are we also voting on a building program?” “Definitely not!” Gividen replied. He told citizens it would be against the law for officials to even submit a building proposal until several months after the new district had

⁴³ “Questions and Answers on Proposed Exira Community School District,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 12 January 1956.

been organized. Other questions about transportation, funding, and district debt sought answers. Gividen assured parents that with reorganization more busses would be needed, thus their small children would not spend excessive amounts of time going to and from school. He also explained that in the long run the state would be more willing to share costs when there were less districts and the local district was not and would not be a debt problem for citizens. Lastly, Gividen addressed the question of what would happen if the community voted not to reorganize right now. “What if are not ready for it yet?” Gividen told citizens, if they did not pass the reorganization plan, chances were the district would be divided up between neighboring districts in the process of reorganization themselves, and Exira would miss out on its opportunity to have its own district. “Whether we like it or not, the time is almost past when we can say with confidence, ‘We don’t want reorganization.’ We must now ask ourselves the question, ‘Which reorganization proposal is best for us?’”⁴⁴ Gividen’s answers must have quelled citizens’ apprehension. He had made it clear that reorganization would improve both the Exira school and its rural neighborhood districts, would not bring higher taxes to farmers, and in fact, would in the long run, bring more state aid to the district, and provide adequate transportation for all rural children to their closest school facility. Gividen had sufficiently addressed the issues of cost, convenience, and control about which farmers were the most concerned.

On 9 February 1956 the *Journal* reported, “Land Slide Vote Favors School Reorganization.” As the paper told its readers, 698 rural residents and 376 town citizens voted in the election. Of the 1,074 ballots cast, 889 were for the proposal and 174 against. Eleven ballots were spoiled. Thus 83.6 percent of voters agreed that reorganizations was the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

right thing for students in the newly formed district. By 1 July the district had completed its reorganization plan, and on 27 August, opening day of school that year, the new district saw a record breaking 764 students enrolled. Of these, 251 students were enrolled in the rural “units” as the district officials referred to their country school houses. While these students were still attending “country school,” they were part of the new community school district. According to A. M. Christ, school district superintendent, “When we speak of Exira Community School students -- all teachers and students are under our supervision even though they are attending rural schools. The teachers in the rural area are our faculty members. The attendance centers are different, but are under the same administration.”⁴⁵

Most of the remaining 513 students attended school in the 1915 building for which residents had worked so hard, and of which they were so proud, decades before. The school district purchased two homes close to the main building, and used them as secondary classrooms. The district also moved a rural school building onto property near the main building to use as a classroom, and rented a building more than a half mile away for agriculture and shop classes. When the old brick building opened in 1915, it held thirty-seven students. Clearly, in 1956, even with the annexes, the building was bursting at the seams with children.⁴⁶

In late September of 1956, Superintendent Paul Wallace of the State Department of Public Instruction came to Exira to observe the new district and make recommendations on how to improve the quality of its programs and services. No mention was made in the *Audubon County Journal* of his findings, but by December, the paper announced that the

⁴⁵ “Adjustments, Changes After Week of School,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 6 September 1956.

⁴⁶ “Proposed Solution For Need of School Building,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 6 June 1957.

district had chosen the Des Moines architectural firm of Smith-Vorhees-Jensen, Architects Associated, to make a school survey to determine the district's need for a new building. The firm compiled information gathered by the Citizen's Committee during the reorganization process in order to make its recommendations. The architects also consulted district department heads and reviewed the requirements of the State Department of Public Instruction. In April of 1957, after they had completed their study, they presented their findings to the local school board. Their goal for the district was "to provide equal and adequate educational facilities for all students in the district."⁴⁷ The board approved the final plans and set a community vote to build a new school building for 27 June.⁴⁸

School activities were front page news in virtually every edition of the *Audubon County Journal*, a clear reflection of the importance that the community attached to education. During May and June, the headlines focused on the up-coming vote for the new school building. According to the paper, the new building would be a Junior-Senior High School that would house grades seven through twelve and would cost the district tax-payers \$595,000. With this money the district could purchase both the ground needed for the building and pay for construction of the building. On 13 June 1957, the paper published an article that itemized the costs and expenditures for the new building and its contents. The editor printed the article not only to explain to patrons where their tax money would be going, but also to quell any rumors that had arisen about the cost of the project.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Citizens of District are Urged to Vote," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 27 June 1957.

⁴⁸ "School Building Program Discussed Here Tuesday," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 11 April 1957.

⁴⁹ "Itemized Savings Prove Project is Practical," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 13 June 1957.

According to the paper, the project would bring an indebtedness of \$595,000, but it would also save the district money, this savings resulting from the closing of the rural school units. District officials estimated that closing these rural schools would save \$26,000 in teacher's salaries, \$7,000 in operation and upkeep of the seventeen buildings, and \$6,000 in transportation costs paid to parents. Nine of the seventeen rural school teachers reported they did not intend to teach in the new district. The district officials would also be able to close down the annexed buildings it was using to supplement space in the 1915 building, saving an additional \$2,500. The paper's editor calculated the expense for farmers and Exira residents as well. According to its figures, the project would cost a little more than twenty cents per acre, thus a farmer on the average 160-acre farm would pay an extra \$32.00 per year. A town resident could expect to pay \$6.12 more per year. The paper announced the location of several public discussion meetings where patrons could go to hear all these costs explained in detail.⁵⁰

For the next two weeks, the paper continued to run articles, both on the front page and in the editorial section, encouraging local citizens to vote for the resolution to build the new school. There is no indication in the paper of any dissent or resistance to the proposal such as letters to the editor or opposing articles; however, the paper expressed a certain amount of uncertainty in its content, and the tone of the articles was anxious about the outcome. The paper's editor clearly favored the vote and his attitude was reflected in his reporting of the public discussion meetings where supportive comments such as one from, "An elderly person," who said: "My children have all grown up, married and gone away, but I want to do something for other children. When my children were small, others were paying taxes to help

⁵⁰ Ibid.

them. I will help now,” were common. Another quotation, which the paper attributed to a “man” said, “I have no children, but someone helped to educate me and I am going to do my share now.” Apparently little opposition was voiced.⁵¹

Voters went to the polls on 27 June 1957, and the numbers showed that a majority of patrons favored the new school building. They also showed that many people did not. The state required a 60 percent approval and the district got 68 percent. Clearly many people were sorry to see the country schools close because they felt the level of education would suffer. They not only feared losing their community centers, but they feared the loss of a quality education. Doug Rendleman, former country school student, recalled that for several years after the reorganization in Exira most of the valedictorians and salutatorians were from the country schools. He said this made many rural residents wonder if they had made the right decision.⁵² Ruth Peterson, another country school student who attended Exira High School before reorganization, recalled that the country school students scored much higher on standardized tests than those in the town schools.⁵³ Emma Ludwig, local resident and long-time teacher of “Audubon #3” reminisced in a town history composed in 1982 to celebrate the 125 year anniversary of the community, “[Country] students did better work, were more responsible, and were more independent.” She attributed this to the fact that these students came from the same neighborhood and were acquainted with each family whose children attended the school. She went on to say that there was a better parent-student-teacher relationship. “Parents would stop in when they brought their kids and visit, and if two

⁵¹ “School Meetings Being Held This Week: Proposed Building Issues are Being Discussed,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 29 June 1957.

⁵² Doug Rendleman, interview by author, questionnaire, Elk Horn, Ia., 26 July 2001.

⁵³ Ruth Peterson, interview by author, questionnaire, Elk Horn, Ia., 26 July 2001.

or more came at the same time, they'd also visit. There was a good feeling about the school all the way around. The communication between parent and teacher was exceptional."⁵⁴ These voices were the minority, however, and they were not reported in the paper and are now remembered only by those who experienced the dramatic change.

Regardless of any underlying regret over the loss of the beloved country schools, Exirans were generally supportive of the community school district and the new building. The lack of public debate and challenge to consolidation in the 1910s was comparable to the relatively peaceful transition toward reorganization in the 1950s and reflected both the cohesiveness of the local population, and their reaffirmation of their sense of place by establishing a broader and more inclusive community.

Perhaps the upcoming celebration of Exira's centennial on 4 July 1957 strengthened further this sense of community. For more than a year, the community had been working on the commemoration of the little town's one-hundredth birthday. The issue of building a new school shared the front page of the *Journal* with the plans for the centennial celebration, and residents focused more on growing 1850s style beards and planning festive activities than they had on the building issue. The excitement of the upcoming events no doubt brought the community even closer together.

This sense of unification, along with feelings of pride and accomplishment, filled the approximately 250 citizens of Exira who braved the icy rain on 23 November 1959 to attend the dedication of their new Junior-Senior High School. The patrons of the Exira School had succeeded in creating a monument to education, and to their sense of community, that would stand as hallowed as any battlefield marker, and represent their sense of identity. The

⁵⁴ History Book Committee, *Quasiquicentennial*, 40.

building encouraged their awareness of the loyalty they felt for the neighborhood they had established, and they believed that for as long as it stood in their midst, it would be a sign of both unity and independence.

The story of reorganization in the southern part of Audubon County is only one of many. In 1962, at the conclusion of this era of school reform and reorganization, there were just 469 school districts remaining in Iowa, a reduction of 4,387 districts since 1944. Many of these new community school districts felt the same pride and security that the Exira district did; however, thirty years later the loyalty, unity, and independence Exira and other districts experienced would again be challenged by a new wave of school reform. Many would struggle to save their community schools, and many would fail. Exira's own *mêlée* would prove to be exceptionally brutal, and its conclusion, unique.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ "New School Dedicated Monday Eve.," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 26 November 1959; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 159; Guy Ghan, Periodic Reports: School District Reorganization Report, 1 February 1991. [on-line]; available from <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/publications/perrept/index.html>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2001.

CHAPTER 4

“Save Our School”: A Threatened Community Fights Back

When the Exira School Board met on 14 December 1989 to vote on the whole-grade sharing agreement they had been preparing for more than a year, they did not expect the meeting to end with the death of a local citizen, and with it, the end of the agreement. More than 150 school district patrons filled the high school cafetorium that night. The majority had come to voice their opposition to the whole-grade sharing plan. When the open forum portion of the meeting began, Thomas Payne, long-time proponent of the Exira school system, and opponent of the plan, stepped to the microphone to address the crowd. His message to his fellow school supporters was “save our school.” Before he had a chance to complete his thoughts, however, he fell to the ground gasping for breath. School board president, DeWayne Nelson caught the dying man before he hit the floor, and board member Dr. Dana Shaffer immediately began resuscitation efforts on Payne. When the emergency medical technicians arrived and carried Payne from the room, the large contingent of people present, who had worked hard to save the local school, believed they had a “martyr” for their cause.¹

Payne’s death brought with it the death of the much-contested whole-grade sharing agreement being hammered out between the school boards of Audubon and Exira, two small school districts situated in Audubon County, in southwestern Iowa. The whole-grade sharing agreement was just the latest episode in the century-long effort to consolidate schools in Audubon County. In this latest effort, however, officials were not attempting to bring together friendly neighbors who had coexisted in Exira and the surrounding countryside for

¹ “Payne Death Ends WGS Public Hearing,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 December 1989. Thomas Payne was a lifelong resident of Exira, Iowa. The son of a prominent Exira physician, he was active in many community affairs and had been the president of the Citizens’ Committee that backed school reorganization in Exira in the 1950s. Paine spoke to the crowd about his disappointment in the boards’ decision to move ahead so quickly with the whole-grade sharing plan.

many years, sharing bonds of community and kinship as they had in the 1910s and 1950s. In 1989, they were attempting to unite the school districts of two towns where for generations residents had held grudges and struggled with animosities that were far from healed. In doing so, many citizens of Exira believed, the two boards were trying to destroy the identity of a community that had existed for 132 years. By the late 1980s, school consolidation was once again a common occurrence in rural Iowa and the citizens of Exira fought a bitter fight over whether to keep their independent district or to join with Audubon, Exira's closest neighboring community.

In the twentieth century, school consolidation in Iowa has never been more than thirty years out of the memory of the state's citizens. The first era of consolidation came early in the century as a response to the Progressive Movement, and was a nation-wide phenomenon except in the Great Plains states where settlement was still relatively new. In Iowa, most of the consolidation that took place during this period occurred between small rural districts that joined to build a high school facility. Very few small towns, rural districts, or sub-districts actually experienced any consolidation. During the 1950s, another nation-wide movement of consolidation, referred to in Iowa as reorganization, took place. During this period, the beloved "little red schoolhouse" became part of history when almost all rural districts consolidated with local independent districts in communities across the country. Americans realized the importance of a K-12 education in order to prepare their children for the new fast-paced, and increasingly urban world, and improvements in transportation, communication, and technology made it possible for them to see potential beyond their neighborhood district school. Exirans almost completely ignored the first of these two movements, but welcomed the second. The community focused on quality education for its

children and moved in the direction citizens believed it could best be administered. In 1989, citizens also believed they were committed to quality education and once again, they were convinced their ideas about school consolidation were best for their children. This time however, citizens divided themselves into two camps that did not agree on how to accomplish these goals.

The school consolidation movement that began in the mid 1980s, which Iowa officials attributed to a period of “natural progression,” was the result of the changing economic face of the state. Three factors were evident: Iowa’s population was changing and shifting; farming had moved from a labor-intensive industry to a capital-intensive one; and there was a dramatic shift of mercantile and business industries from small communities to larger ones. While consolidation was not the nation-wide movement it had been in the 1910s and 1950s, there is evidence that other states with large rural populations were experiencing the same difficulties. In 1991, Minnesota had 432 school districts, 48 of which did not maintain a high school facility. Through their own type of sharing agreements, these districts were sending their upper-level students to neighboring school districts. Nebraska, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Michigan were also seeking new and more economical ways of educating students in rural areas, and they were experiencing struggles over consolidation. These states sought out experts from Iowa to assist them in their search.² Most midwestern and plains states were faced with falling rural populations, transformation of agriculture, and the loss of small-town businesses. Iowa is emblematic of this portion of America.

² Guy Ghan, “Periodic Reports: School District Reorganization Report,” June 1991, [On-line], available from <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/ecese/asis/reorg/index.html#rds>, accessed 16 February 2003.

Of these three factors that rural states faced, population changes were perhaps the most significant. The population in Iowa grew only 24.4 percent between 1900 and 1990, while the national population increased 227 percent. Iowa's population in 1980 was 2,913,808 and by 1990 it had dropped to 2,776,775. The population of Iowans less than twenty years of age fell from 754,265 children to 612,515 between 1960 and 1990. These numbers are even more dramatic when realizing that the number of rural children in 1960 was 49 percent of the total while in 1990 the total proportion of rural children was only 40 percent. If farm children are singled out, the numbers are even more significant. In 1960, 27 percent of children in Iowa lived on farms; in 1990, less than 10 percent did so. The population in Audubon County in 1960 was 10,919, by 1990 there were 7,334 people still living in the county. The population of Audubon fell from 2,928 in 1960, to 2,524 in 1990 while Exira's population fell from 1,111 to 955 during the same period. In fact, only seven of the 99 counties in Iowa gained population between 1980 and 1990. Most rural counties and small towns in Iowa followed these patterns. With this loss of population across Iowa, small school districts also lost large numbers of students and state education leaders calculated that the fewer students per school, the more expensive it was to maintain the district.³

Another important factor in the changing fiscal circumstances of Iowa came from changes in agriculture. The farm crisis that began in the late 1970s and continued well into the 1980s seriously affected the state, especially its rural areas and farm population. From 1930 to 1980, there was a 59 percent loss in total number of farms from 964,659 in 1930 to

³ Ibid.; Ghan, "Periodic Reports," 1 February 1993; "Population 19 or younger by age group and location, 1930-1990," Census of Population, [on-line] <http://www.edinfo.state.ia.us>, accessed, 02 March 2003; "Total Population for Iowa Incorporated Places: 1850-2000," U.S. Bureau of the Census, [on-line] <http://www.silo.lib.ia.us>, accessed, 02 March 2003.

391,070 in 1980. In 1987, the number of farms in the state had dwindled to 105,180 from a high of 228,622 in 1900.⁴ These numbers may not be an accurate look at the actual loss of family farms however, because the number of hobby farmers had risen. Hobby farmers do not typically make their living from farming, and their farms are much smaller than those that were common in the 1940s and 1950s. The farm crisis weeded out many of the marginal farmers who were unable to make a living on their own land and could no longer afford to rent or buy larger parcels of property. Many farmers in Iowa had invested in large machinery, livestock facilities, and land purchases that they could not maintain when interest rates on loans rose to over 20 percent and bankers began to demand immediate payment and threaten foreclosure.

The farm crisis did more than destroy the dreams of many farmers; it also damaged many small town businesses when farm families no longer had the financial resources to make large purchases such as automobiles, furniture, appliances, and leisure items. With the growth of cities like Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City, and continuing improvements of highways and county roads, citizens from small communities found it easier to travel fifty miles or more to purchase goods they needed from discount stores like Wal-Mart, which sprung up on the edges of big and small cities. These stores carried everything a family needed and at prices small local establishments could not compete with. Very soon, the day when every small town had its own grocery store, gas station, hardware store, drug store, and theatre ended and many Iowans no longer considered their towns “full-service” communities. Unfortunately, when small communities could no longer maintain their mercantile establishments, they also found it difficult to retain their school districts,

⁴ Ghan, “Periodic Reports,” June 1991.

particularly their high schools. Many small communities like Exira, in rural Audubon County, began a struggle to maintain their identities that for generations had been bound to the local school district. At the same time, education leaders and state legislators looked for ways to save money on education by encouraging small districts like those in Audubon County to consolidate.⁵

In 1962, at the end of the second great movement of school consolidation in Iowa, there were 469 school districts in Iowa. All but one of these had a high school. This number shows a decline of 357 high schools during the ten-year period of reorganization from 1952 to 1962. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of high schools in Iowa declined 20 percent to 353. Thirty-one school districts did not have a high school within their boundaries during the 1995-1996 school year. These schools were participating in a whole-grade sharing agreement with a neighboring district. Whole-grade sharing was the latest tactic state officials had developed to encourage and expedite school district consolidation in Iowa.⁶

This new era of school consolidation, with whole-grade sharing as its engine, began in Iowa in 1985 when two small school districts, Corwith-Wesley and Lu Verne voted to share their high school and middle school students.⁷ Whole-grade sharing involves precisely what it says: two districts sharing whole grades of students. This means that the two school districts share their middle school/junior high and high school facilities. One community retains the middle school/junior high and receives all the students in the middle grades, and the other community retains the high school and receives all the students from the upper

⁵ Ibid. For a closer look at the farm crisis that struck Iowa in the 1970s and 1980s see Osha Gray Davidson, *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996.)

⁶ Ghan, "Periodic Reports," July 1995.

⁷ Ghan, "Periodic Reports," June 1991.

grades. Typically, the two districts maintain their own elementary schools. If there is a size discrepancy, the larger of the two communities usually preserves its high school and the smaller the middle school. The size and condition of the buildings can also be a contributing factor in the decision. This agreement does not initially involve reorganization or consolidation; however, whole-grade sharing usually evolves into a consolidation agreement. Once a district has begun sharing teachers, administrators, curriculum, and students, it is very difficult to return to the previous situation.

Whole-grade sharing came about when state education officials and legislators began looking for ways of reducing the cost of education in Iowa. At the end of the consolidation movement in the 1950s, when local property tax paid for 80 percent of the cost of education, school funding changed. By the mid 1980s, local funds only covered 50 percent of the cost with the state covering most of the remainder. The funding formula that was in place to equalize spending in all districts, favored small districts. Previously, wealthy districts were able to spend more on their students than poorer districts. In fact, wealthier districts could not only spend more money per pupil, but the tax rates for the residents of these districts were up to three times lower. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, legislators attempted to equalize per-student spending between large districts and small ones by offering new local tax options and the use of “phantom students” to cushion districts affected by declining enrollments. Even with these added monies, it was far more expensive to operate a small school district than a large one, and this forced legislators to look at ways of reducing the numbers of small districts in the state.⁸

⁸ Ibid. The term “phantom student” was used to identify a percentage of the numbers of students lost in a district due to declining enrollment which could be added back to bolster actual enrollment. For a complete explanation of per-pupil funding see the finance section of the *Iowa Code*.

While the numbers of school districts in Iowa did not fluctuate much between 1962 and 1984, the state as a whole changed tremendously, thus in the mid 1980s, the Iowa Department of Education (DE) began a concerted effort to reduce the number of school districts in the state. In order to make these reductions, state lawmakers passed several pieces of legislation that forced small districts to reevaluate their programs and if needed, make considerable changes. Legislators and education leaders claimed these laws were not meant to force reorganization, but instead would help districts realize their fullest potential, possibly by eventual consolidation. Lawmakers divided the legislation into five separate categories. First, officials changed reorganization laws to make them more lenient and less forceful. Second, legislators offered financial incentives for whole-grade, superintendent, and administrator sharing between districts as well as for total reorganization. These incentives, according to lawmakers, were not enough to initiate a consolidation effort, but they would help to soften the financial blows that districts might encounter if they decided to reorganize. Thirdly, legislators went on to adopt new standards that required each district to establish committees for development of school policies. They stipulated minimum numbers of courses taught in high schools, and they required added personnel such as full time guidance counselors, principals, and librarians.⁹

The fourth piece of legislation that encouraged districts to reevaluate their programs was the newly adopted policy of open enrollment that legislators made available to school district patrons in 1989, and which initiated problems that would eventually lead to

⁹ Ghan, "Periodic Reports," June 1991. According to Ghan, these incentives were not the driving force behind many schools decision to whole-grade share and reorganize, but rather helped to neutralize problems and criticisms at the beginning of the process.

reorganization of some districts due to attrition. Open enrollment made it possible for parents who were not satisfied with the school district in their own community to move their children to a neighboring community's school. When the child moved to the new district, the state and local funding the home school district received moved with the student. When a whole-grade sharing or consolidation agreement failed, this was a way for parents who favored the agreement to move their children to the other district regardless of the decision of the two boards. Most of these moves came from very small districts to larger ones, however some city school districts experienced a loss of some of their students to nearby suburban districts.¹⁰ Finally, legislators initiated new financial formulas for counting students and distributing state funds for which small districts were soon unable to compensate. This new formula eliminated the "phantom students" that small districts depended upon for equalization of funding. The new policies did not do away with the local option levies school districts could pass, however, so small districts began to rely more heavily on them, and since these cost local taxpayers more money, legislators hoped residents would choose consolidation rather than higher taxes.¹¹

Although the state claimed these new pieces of legislation were not created to lead to the eventual consolidation of many small districts, that is exactly what they did. Members of the DE made several recommendations to local school boards that were beginning to toy with the idea of whole-grade sharing and eventual reorganization. They recommended that the school boards should begin the process with a thorough study of the district and its situation and advised that local citizens should conduct the studies. The DE also strongly

¹⁰ Ibid.; *Iowa Code* 1999: Section 282.18.

¹¹ Ghan, "Periodic Reports," June 1991.

recommended that board members keep an open mind to the desires of the community, and of utmost importance, boards should not act in haste.¹²

Department of Education consultant, Guy Ghan, in his reports on school reorganization, described the process school boards should use in order to make whole-grade sharing, and possibly eventual consolidation work. He believed that whole-grade sharing was an emotional process as well as a political one. Unlike school consolidation, whole-grade sharing did not require a vote of the people, therefore the approval of the community was extremely important in order to make the agreement work. Ghan emphasized in his literature that due to this fact, school boards needed to be particularly diligent in their involvement of the community in all aspects of the agreements. He recommended boards create citizens' committees and hire outside consultants to evaluate the agreement. He also told districts to hold several public meetings and invite discussion among members of both communities and between boards. He said that there could not be too much attention to details and boards should leave nothing to guessing by citizens. If districts followed these recommendations, he argued, "[They] cannot be accused of rushing into whole-grade sharing without adequate planning and study. . . . Boards cannot be charged with lack of adequate contract negotiation."¹³ Reorganization/consolidation meant taking the issue to the people and allowing them to make the decision about what would become of their school district. With whole-grade sharing, the school board took control of this decision, thus they were in a precarious position, and needed to be aware and sensitive to their local constituents' thoughts about where they were going with the school. The local school district was and is the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

lifeblood of many small Iowa communities and local citizens have and will fight to the end to save this part of their identity. The department of education, and its consultants like Ghan, were adamant about including communities in the decision-making process involving whole-grade sharing, and most school boards did so. Some districts' boards decided to make these decisions on their own, and when this happened, when the community did not feel the board was considering their wishes and desires, they rebelled and fought the agreement. This occurred in Exira, Iowa.

In November of 1959, the last of the rural school districts in the southern half of Audubon County had reorganized to become part of the Exira Community School District. Exira had a fine new junior high/high school building and the newly remodeled 1915 era school house was prepared for elementary students. The proud community was ready to launch a new and modern era of education. School population in Exira grew through the 1960s reaching peak enrollment in 1972 when the graduating class had seventy-five members.¹⁴ Soon after, however, with the graduation of the baby boom generation, school population began to decline. By September of 1979 overall school enrollment had fallen to 439 students, in 1981, 391 students remained, and by 1989 there were just 350 students enrolled in the district. During the 1970s and 1980s, the school board dealt with these falling numbers with staff reductions, adjustments in curriculum, and attempts at tax increases.¹⁵

In 1988, Exira shared its superintendent, elementary principal, and two teachers with the neighboring Elk Horn district. The Exira system was meeting the new requirements for school personnel and it was able to offer the classes required by the state. The district,

¹⁴ "Patrons Oppose Audubon-Exira Sharing," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 16 December 1988.

¹⁵ "Exira enrollment slide continues," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 29 September 1989.

however, was a single-section district, meaning there was only one section of each elementary grade. The high school offered more classes than there were students to fill.¹⁶ The school board and some district residents believed it was time to begin looking for a way to provide a better education system for the students of the Exira School District. In November of 1988, the board met to discuss the possibility of whole-grade sharing with its neighbor to the north, Audubon. During the meeting members did not discuss the possibility of sharing with any other school district even though it was already sharing administration and faculty with Elk Horn. On 18 November, when the regular school board news appeared in the local paper, the *Audubon County Journal*, the residents of the community heard for the first time that the board was considering a sharing agreement with Audubon. In the same issue, Jack Krier, editor of the *Audubon County Journal* and the *Audubon News Advocate*, admonished citizens of both communities to support the effort of the two school boards and face the issue with an “open mind.” Krier admitted that the proposal might “trigger emotional outbursts on both sides.” Nevertheless, he hoped his readers would, “Wholeheartedly support a combined effort.”¹⁷ Krier knew that the citizens of Exira would not be in favor of the whole-grade sharing agreement because he was clearly aware of an age-old grudge that existed between the two communities.

The grudge Krier and most area residents identified originated with a fight for the county courthouse. Many Exirans believed the battle that took place more than 100 years

¹⁶ “Students are Prime Concern,” Letter to the editor, *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 October 1989. Exira offered eight levels of computer instruction but only taught two because of low numbers. “Audubon WGS Meeting Monday Went Smoothly,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 15 December 1989.

¹⁷ Jack Krier, “Editorial,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 18 November 1988, 2. Jack Krier was the editor of both the *Audubon County Journal*, and the *Audubon News Advocate*, which served the city of Audubon. Most of the editorials and articles dealing with whole-grade sharing appeared in both papers.

earlier was the wedge that drove the two communities apart and the event that made it impossible for residents of Exira to “let bygones be bygones.” According to one history of Audubon County, the battle between Exira and the northern portion of the county began as early as 1870 when county Democrats won a much contested election for a district judge by only four votes, leaving the local Republicans disgruntled and crying foul. The editor of the local history believed that this fight divided the Exira citizenry into small factions led by “old grouches.” The questionable election would later cause the loss of the hotly contested “County-Seat Contest.” This battle for the courthouse and county seat is what many modern day Audubon County residents look back to when they talk about the problems between Exirans and Audubonites.¹⁸ The ugly chapter in the county history began in 1879 and brought so much strife to the communities, residents still reflect on it 120 years later. Local historians record that the Rock Island Railroad Company built a line from Atlantic, Iowa in Cass County, north, bypassing the town of Exira, to the newly formed community of Audubon in the northern part of the county. This section of the county grew quickly when a large number of Danish immigrants, as well as many others involved in the homestead movement, settled there. The railroad employed a majority of the people in the area and set up temporary housing and other facilities in the new town of Audubon. According to the locals, the railroad made sure there were plenty of people in the northern part of the county when election day arrived. Some residents of Exira believed that the railroad sent a train up from Atlantic loaded with “temporary” Audubonites just in time for the election.¹⁹

¹⁸ H. F. Andrews, ed., *History of Audubon County Iowa: Its People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Company, 1915), 142.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 145-58.

In 1879, the Audubon paper claimed that Captain Stuart, the railroad representative from Atlantic had promised to pay for a new courthouse in Audubon with fire-proof vaults and county residents would be free from any debt for the building.²⁰ This pronouncement fueled the fire of discord and persuaded a majority of voters, mainly in the bustling northern half of Audubon County, to vote for the location change. County citizens voted 841 to 620 in favor of moving the court records to a new home in Audubon. Officials immediately transferred the records in a special train to Audubon, protected by several well-armed men, for transport. Stuart never paid for a courthouse but the railroad did construct a building on the east side of the Audubon city square that they “leased” to the county for several years for use as a courthouse. County residents were still fighting twenty years later when in 1905, officials attempted to issue bonds to build a new courthouse in Audubon. The people of Exira opposed the bond issue. They quickly raised their own bond of \$40,000 and attempted to bring the courthouse back to Exira.²¹ This attempt to move the courthouse again failed and eventually the county built a permanent structure in Audubon.

The courthouse battle was the birth of what would become a long struggle between the two communities. Each generation of Exirans and Audubonites would fuel the fire with their own memories and traditions. At some point, Audubon residents began to refer to Exira as “B” town, while they called their own community “A” town. According to county history, this evolved out of a dispute between two fraternal organizations, the Macabees of Exira and the Odd Fellows of Audubon, but in 1989, residents of Exira believed the nickname was pejorative and illustrative of the animosity between the two communities. In the 1970s,

²⁰ Ibid., 158.

²¹ Ibid., 158.

according to one Exiran, “If we wanted to party on the weekends we would go to Atlantic, if we wanted to fight, we went to Audubon.”²² During much of the century, Exira and Audubon had been archrivals in extra-curricular sporting events and community activities. Unlike in the 1950s when Exira residents could bring their neighboring country schools into the “fold” and form a larger community, in 1989 Exirans could not imagine a community that included Audubon. Clearly the residents of the two communities had a long way to go before they would be ready to share an institution as defining as their school district.

Before the public announcement of its intentions, the Exira school board had already met with a research director for the Area Education Association to create a survey that would measure the attitudes of local residents and identify the level of opposition or openness to the idea of whole-grade sharing with Audubon. Before they had mailed the survey out, however, board members must have realized that the people of Exira were not going to be easy to convince. Opposition surfaced immediately, and by the next edition of the weekly paper, members of the Exira community were already voicing their opposition to any sort of change in the school district.²³ On 9 December, at the regular meeting of the Exira School Board, forty-five district patrons were present to express their disapproval of the whole-grade

²² Neal Wolf, conversation with author, Jefferson, Iowa, 23 February 2003.

²³ Frank Rasmussen, life-long resident of Exira, and much-respected attorney, was the first to express this attitude in the first of his many letters to the editor. He would become the legal voice of opposition to the movement. He pointed out that 1) Small schools offer the best educational opportunities for students with a low drop out rate. 2) Exira has always had an excellent school system and should be concentrating on improving it, not closing it. 3) Current population trends are economic and not school problems and will eventually change and return to an upward trend like the rest of the nation. 4) If Exira closes its high school it will be impossible to open it later when things do turn around. And 5) There are many options available to the district that do not include closing the high school. “Letter to the editor,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 2 December 1988, 2.

sharing proposal. They brought a petition, signed by 280 local residents, to show the board that they were not alone in their displeasure.²⁴

Board members appear to have dismissed this initial sign of discontent as over-reaction because they proceeded with their investigation and mailed surveys to over 1000 area residents in January of 1989. Patrons returned 239 surveys; less than half of the surveys returned were from patrons who had children of school age. The *Journal* published the results in the paper the following week with a headline that read, “School District Patrons Prefer ‘Going it alone.’” The paper did not give the total number of those responding negatively, but it reported that if a whole-grade sharing agreement or merger became inevitable, most would prefer to share with Audubon. Almost as many, however, reported they would prefer a merger with Elk Horn. In a graph showing some of the rankings that had appeared in the survey, on a scale of four to one, four being strongly agree and one being strongly disagree, the ranking Exirans gave to the statement, “Whole grade sharing with another district should be considered,” was a 2.12, barely above the “disagree” rank. During a meeting with the consultant who had created the survey, however, one board member concluded that the 74 percent of the patrons who did not complete the survey must be “content to let us (the school board) decide what’s best for the district,” even though the actual community response to the agreement was overwhelmingly negative.²⁵

²⁴ “School district patrons prefer ‘going it alone,’” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 24 February 1989.

²⁵ Ibid. Of the 239 surveys returned, 109 respondents chose sharing with Audubon, 93 with Elk Horn, and 14 were divided between other neighboring towns. See Appendix A.

Two weeks later, the paper announced that the Exira and Audubon school boards had voted unanimously to explore a whole-grade sharing agreement in-depth.²⁶ The boards agreed to aim for an implementation of the agreement beginning with the 1990-1991 school year. This gave them less than a year to put together the entire plan before the application deadline the following February. Both districts agreed to initiate a feasibility study immediately. Dr. William Anderson of Educator's Leadership Services, in Des Moines, Iowa, conducted the study. He looked at the areas of curriculum, transportation, enrollment, finances, and facilities. In June of 1989, he presented the results of the study at a joint meeting of patrons from both districts. Before this meeting however, the two school boards had already created four 20-member committees of local patrons to investigate the whole-grade sharing agreement.²⁷ Each committee would have ten members from Exira and ten from Audubon. The boards asked the committees to investigate transportation, finances, education programs and personnel, and enrollment and facilities.²⁸

When Dr. Anderson presented the results of his finding at a special meeting on June 15, there was a large crowd in attendance.²⁹ Anderson ended his presentation with a list of twenty-five general conclusions and recommendations for the action. The recommendations

²⁶ "Unanimous Votes Okay In-Depth Exploration of Whole Grade Sharing," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 3 March 1989. The paper also printed an article that announced a shared wrestling program with Elk Horn was being dropped due to low numbers of participants.

²⁷ "Large crowd attends whole grade sharing meeting," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 June 1989.

²⁸ The *Journal* published the names of the members of each committee. A close comparison of the names on the committees and those identified in the Exira paper as proponents of the issue will show that the majority of the members of these committees favored whole-grade sharing. When the committees gave their final analysis, each one presented a minority opinion that represented the lesser number of opponents to the agreement. 12 June 1989.

²⁹ The *Journal* does not give a number but the author, who was a resident of Audubon County during this period remembers that there were about 100 people present.

called for the board to develop an agreement that would specifically define such areas of future potential disagreements such as transportation, staffing, calendar matters, sports team mascots, and school colors. Later when residents asked how the board would handle these issues, one of its members replied that the two boards would work these issues out after they had signed the agreement contract.³⁰

At the 15 June meeting, several patrons asked the school board to initiate a study that would present options for the district other than whole-grade sharing and consolidation. The board appeared to be open to this suggestion, but left it up to the community to find a source for such a study. Frank Rasmussen, local retired attorney, presented the board with several names of education experts and even offered to pay for the study out of his own pocket.³¹ In late September members of the newly formed “Save Our School” group held several meetings with Dr. Stanley Jensen, executive director of Rural Schools of Iowa. He prepared a study of his own at no cost to the district and identified a lengthy list of alternatives for the school district that would make it possible for the Exira School to remain independent. Jensen reported to the board there were several options it could exercise, including block scheduling, clustering, tele-communications, or one-class-at-a-time. Jensen admitted his bias by stating he wanted as many Iowa schools to remain independent as possible. When a meeting-goer asked school board president Nelson how much time the board would spend on investigating these alternatives, he replied, “I can’t answer that. We will meet later and work on it.” Nelson also commented on a suggestion from another board member that they drop

³⁰ “Large crowd attends whole grade sharing meeting,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 June 1989. See appendix B.

³¹ “School Board ponders alternatives,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 18 August 1989.

all extra-curricular activities in order to save money if the district decided to go it alone:

“Personally, I’m against that but it is an option that we maybe should look into.” Clearly, the board was willing to use scare tactics to convince the district patrons that whole-grade sharing was its only option. Board members outlined their objections to seeking other options to whole-grade sharing and pointed out that they were getting tired of “putting things on the back burner.” They took no further action in looking for alternatives to whole-grade sharing.³²

Citizens of Exira continued to be vocal with their opinions about the whole-grade sharing agreement. Letters to the editor continued to flow into the local paper. Most of these letters were from those who were opposed to the sharing agreement. For the most part, their main concern was that the board was pushing the whole-grade sharing plan through too quickly and they would not give the community a voice in the decision. The school board was quick to point out that the decision to whole-grade share was theirs alone, and they were not required to consider the feelings of the community at all. So many citizens attended board meetings during the fall of 1989, the board held them in one of the schools’ gymnasiums, or auditoriums. At one school board meeting Debra Stenstrom, representing the “Save Our School” committee that had been organized to fight the agreement, presented a petition with 739 signatures asking the board to set a one-year moratorium on the decision to “let the communities wounds heal.” Stenstrom reported that most citizens of Exira believed the board was moving too quickly to push the district into the whole-grade sharing agreement and those

³² “ Board to vote on Sharing Proposal Oct. 12th,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 29 September 1989; “Meeting Discussed Alternatives to Whole Grade Sharing Proposal,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 September 1989; “Students are Prime Concern,” Letter to the editor, *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 October 1989.

opposed felt as though they had “not been properly dealt with.”³³ The board did not respond to the call for a one-year moratorium because they knew if they waited another year, they would not be successful. At one point board member, Dana Shafer commented, “Every time we get close to making a major decision we never complete our commitment. We need to make a decision. I want to finish a project just once.” Three of the five members were up for reelection within the next two years, and with the sentiments of the community turning against them, they understood they would not have a chance of reelection.³⁴

One seat on the board did open up in the fall of 1989 and two people filed to run for the position. One of the candidates opposed the whole-grade sharing agreement and the other supported it. Jeanette Wilkerson represented those opposed. She had been a resident of Exira for thirty years and had put her four children through the district school system. She was a local business owner, and before the whole-grade sharing fight arose, had not been involved in the politics of the district. Dennis Williams was the second candidate and was the chairman of the transportation committee investigating the agreement. Williams was a graduate of the local high school and had two children in the district. He had moved out of the community after college but had recently returned to raise his children in a small town environment. When the voters went to the polls in September, they chose Wilkerson to represent them on the board. The final vote count was 231 for Wilkerson and 73 for Williams.³⁵

³³ “School Board Voted for Intent to Whole Grade Share With Audubon,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 20 October 1989.

³⁴ “Board to vote on Sharing Proposal Oct. 12th,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 29 September 1989.

³⁵ “School Board election: Wilkerson Wins,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 15 September 1989.

This overwhelming show of support for a candidate who would fight the whole-grade sharing agreement did not stop the school board, however. Those members who favored the decision to whole-grade share still commanded a majority on the board, and they continued to work towards the agreement. Soon after the election, three of the four committees gave their reports in a joint meeting of the Audubon and Exira school boards. The *Journal* reported that a disappointing crowd of only a dozen or so people showed up at the meeting to hear the findings of the committees. Perhaps by this time the opposition in Exira believed the board was not listening to them and since they also believed most committee members favored the whole-grade sharing agreement, they were not particularly interested in what each committee had to report. Whole-grade sharing opponents were in the process of launching their own battle to save their school and they focused on that rather than on listening to the findings of those who they considered the “other side.”³⁶

The editor of the Audubon County papers continued to anger Exira citizens opposed to whole-grade sharing by putting a pro-whole-grade sharing slant on every article he published. In September, he announced on the front page of the *Journal*, “Exira Enrollment Slide Continues.” Krier reported that enrollment in Exira was down eight students from the previous year and that Audubon gained ten students. The paper also printed a graph showing the school enrollment for Exira for the past eleven years. He did not print such a graph outlining Audubon’s overall falling enrollment and he did not acknowledge that falling enrollment was common throughout the state. Krier would not attend or report on any of the activities of the Save Our School (SOS) group, and when one Exira resident wrote and asked

³⁶ “Whole grade sharing reports published,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 15 September 1989.

why he did not cover both sides of the issue, he responded in print that perhaps the reader should cancel her subscription if she did not feel she was getting her money's worth. The only thing that appeared in the paper regarding SOS was either submitted by the group themselves or was a negative comment in an editorial.³⁷

On Friday, 20 October, the board voted to approve a motion of intent for the whole-grade sharing agreement with Audubon. The vote was three to two with Wilkerson and Shaffer casting the two negative votes. Although Dr. Shaffer, Exira's only resident physician, supported the whole-grade sharing agreement, he was not certain that it could work with as much opposition as there was. Shaffer's mostly elderly patients bombarded him on a regular basis with comments about their disapproval to the agreement. Because of his public occupation, he was the easiest board member for many of the local residents to approach. The senior citizens of Exira were extremely opinionated about the agreement because it meant losing the high school they helped build in the 1950s and they believed if they lost their school the town would die.³⁸ Almost 250 people attended the meeting and most of those present were in opposition to whole-grade sharing. After the vote, the board asked one member of the community to speak for each side of the divided community. Nancy Jensen, pastor of the local Congregational Church, spoke for those who supported the agreement, and Debra Stenstrom, SOS leader, spoke for those opposed. Both made articulate

³⁷ "Exira enrollment slide continues," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 29 September 1989; "Where's the News Coverage--," Letter to the editor, *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 10 November 1989; "Save Our School Committee," Contributed by the Save our School Committee, *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 27 October 1989.

³⁸ Dana Shaffer, D.O., interviewed by author, telephone, 16 March 2001.

statements and Stenstrom presented the petition asking for a one-year moratorium.³⁹ Several people at the meeting noted that when the school board members left that night, they left the petition on the table. Not one of them even picked it up to look at it.⁴⁰ During the meeting, Board President, Nelson read off a list of events outlining the steps the board had taken to study the issue. These steps began in September of 1988 and culminated with that night's meeting. Most Exira residents still believed the board had not taken enough time to investigate and were pushing too fast. The board knew, however, that according to state law, they had to have a public meeting to discuss the issue thirty days before the 1 February deadline for the vote.⁴¹

By November, the arguments for and against whole-grade sharing had escalated to a fevered pitch. The local paper published several letters every week that gave each side's story and consistently added an editorial comment that made a jab at those opposed to the agreement. The editor was not ashamed of his position and let his readers know how he felt. He accused Exirans of holding on to their age-old grudge against Audubon and referred to the courthouse battle over and over again. Krier still refused to attend SOS meetings and never reported on their activities in the paper.⁴²

³⁹ "Board to vote on sharing proposal Oct. 12th," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 29 September 1989.

⁴⁰ Jeanette Wilkerson, interview by author, tape recording, Exira Ia., 11 March 2001. Board member Connie Faga commented at this meeting that he believed the majority of the people of Exira favored the whole-grade sharing agreement. The crowd greeted this statement with jeering and booing, "All Guilty of 'Cheap Shots,'" Letter to the editor, *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 27 October 1998.

⁴¹ "School board voted for intent to whole grade share with Audubon," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 20 October 1989.

⁴² "Save Our School Committee," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 27 October 1989.

By December, neither the paper's editor nor the school board could continue to ignore SOS when committee members filed an affidavit of appeal with the Iowa Department of Education to halt the agreement. The suit argued that the board had not used proper procedures leading up to the vote to initiate the agreement. By this time, most of the citizens of Exira and Audubon were shaking their heads in disbelief at what was happening. Those opposed to what the board was doing could not believe that no one in power was listening to them, and those who agreed with the board's actions were dismayed at the attitudes of Exira's citizens. The struggle was beginning to break up friendships and even disrupt families. In an interview, Debra Stenstrom, whole-grade sharing opponent and SOS organizer, remembered the card club she and her husband belonged to was split down the middle over the issue. One evening, she said, as she was getting ready for the monthly card party at her house, she received a phone call from one of the couples on the "other side." The woman told Stenstrom that she and her husband "could no longer sit across the table with people who were so backward and were willing to destroy the school." Several families struggled to stay close because they took different sides in the issue. Even local churches began to divide down the middle with some pastors taking sides and alienating members from the opposing side.⁴³

Even with all the strife and disagreement the board pressed on. They scheduled the required public meeting for 14 December, at which time they would distribute the whole-grade sharing agreement to those present and open the floor for questions and comments. The December date would give the board plenty of time to work out any problems with the

⁴³ Debra Stenstrom, interview by author, tape recording, Exira Ia., 12 March 2001; Linda Paulsen, interview by author, tape recording, Exira Ia., 12 March 2001; Mike and Kay Rasmussen, interview by author, tape recording, Exira, Ia., 11 March 2001.

agreement before the deadline on 1 February. The Audubon board did the same in its community. Approximately sixty-five people attended the Audubon meeting and there appeared to be no dissension in the group. The major concern for Audubon residents was that their children attending junior high in Exira would get the same quality education offered in Audubon. The Audubon board assured them that Exira would meet the requirements by the time school started in the fall. According to the *Journal*, “Audubon superintendent Quentin Reifenrath praised the Audubon people for their support of the project and for their positive approach that had allowed the board to be open-minded throughout the negotiations.” He went on to say, in reference to a comment on the way Exira was dealing with the situation, “Other districts in Iowa have experienced similar reaction in their communities when entering into whole-grade sharing. Once the agreement is in place support grows.” During the Audubon meeting, a resident of that town asked the superintendent why Audubon was pursuing an agreement that the citizens of Exira clearly did not want. Reifenrath replied that both boards thought it was best for the students.⁴⁴

There are several reasons why Audubon residents did not respond to the whole-grade sharing agreement in the same way that Exira residents did. First, Audubon was the larger of the two communities and it was not at risk of losing its high school. Second, people in Audubon believed that the whole-grade sharing agreement was only temporary and that when the three years of sharing were up, Exira would be forced to consolidate. Since Audubon was larger, it was not at any risk of losing its district. In fact, many Audubonites believed they would only have to send their junior high school students to Exira for a few years, and that

⁴⁴ “Audubon WGS meeting Monday went smoothly,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 15 December 1989.

eventually, they would have the entire district in their own community. Finally, Audubon did not remember the courthouse battle in the way residents of Exira did. They held no grudges against Exira because they had won the earlier battle. Most Audubonites could not understand what the fuss was all about.⁴⁵

The “fuss,” however, continued and when Exira held its public meeting on 14 December, more than 150 patrons were there to show either their opposition or support for the whole-grade sharing agreement. Exirans who opposed the agreement knew there was nothing they could do to stop the vote, but they wanted to make the board as uncomfortable as possible with its decision. After several patrons stood to ask questions and give their opinion of the way the board had handled the entire situation, Thomas Payne took the microphone. He took a few minutes to “set the scene” for his comments, then, before he had a chance to continue with his thoughts, he gasped for breath and fell to the floor.⁴⁶ Payne’s death not only ended the meeting that evening, but it brought to a close the entire chapter in the Audubon County school consolidation.⁴⁷

Three days later the Exira board met to decide what to do next. The board voted four to one to end the whole-grade sharing proposal. Connie Faga, the only member who voted to carry on the WGS agreement said, “If we do this, one of my concerns is that we are finished as a board. Also, what will the group demand next?” He finished by saying, “I don’t understand people of this area. They have absolutely no responsibility toward people in

⁴⁵ Nicole Weiderstein, conversation with author, Audubon, Ia., September, 1989.

⁴⁶ “Payne death ends WGS public hearing.” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 December 1989.

⁴⁷ See appendix C.

power.” After they had cast their votes, two members of the board, DeWayne Nelson and Faga, resigned their positions.⁴⁸

The closing of this chapter in Audubon County history only led to the opening of another. The struggle between the two communities and the citizens of Exira continued for several more years as proponents of the whole-grade sharing agreement proceeded to open enroll their children into the Audubon school district, costing the Exira district thousands of dollars in payments to Audubon. Both sides fought and sued over school bussing infringements and athletic participation by the open-enrollees. Many friendships and family relationships never healed because of the struggle. Ten years after their struggle against whole-grade sharing, some of the strongest members of the SOS movement look back and wonder if the actions they took were correct. Some believe that even though the struggle strengthened the district initially, the system had since deteriorated. Linda Paulsen later reflected, “I have had some doubts about our system today. All we hear is ‘we gotta cut this, we gotta cut that.’ The superintendent has told the board they need to start looking for someone to go with. It seems like were kind of back where we started, and we will probably end up there.” In hindsight, Debra Stenstrom said she would like to see a bigger school system and more opportunity for the students. “I look back now and sort of wish that it would have gone through in some ways.” While Exira was not the only community in Iowa to reject a whole-grade sharing agreement, it was one of just a few that did.⁴⁹

In 1996, DE consultant, Guy Ghan declared the school consolidation era that began

⁴⁸ “Exira board votes down WGS proposal,” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 December 1989.

⁴⁹ Paulsen, interview; Stenstrom, interview. Paulsen and Stenstrom were members of the SOS committee and both were elected to the school board to replace the members who resigned when the sharing agreement failed.

with the Corwith-Wesley/Lu Verne whole-grade sharing partnership in 1985 had come to an end. In his July 1996 consolidation report he announced that during that school year, no new high school closings had occurred and no schools had entered into new whole-grade sharing agreements. In 1985, when the era had begun, there were 437 Iowa school districts operating their own high schools. Ten years later, in 1995, there were 379 districts in Iowa; only 354 still had a high school. During the ten-year period the number of school districts decreased by forty-eight, and with twenty-six school districts still involved in a whole-grade sharing agreement during the 1995-1996 school year, the number would fall even further. Ghan also announced that once again, Iowa schools had entered into an era of “Organizational Stability,” and he said the ending date for this period was blank. Ghan believed Iowans would face school consolidation again in the future but he could not predict when.⁵⁰

Overall, Ghan and the department of education believed the consolidation era had been a success. Of the more than 170 whole-grade sharing agreements signed by districts since the era began, there were only 31 failed attempts at total reorganization. Twenty-one of these failures succeeded during subsequent elections. These statistics do not include the agreement between Exira and Audubon, however, because board members voted it down before they signed the contract.⁵¹ Had it passed, it is very possible Exira and Audubon would have been successful in their sharing agreement and would have eventually consolidated. In 2003, both communities are still very close to the same size as they were in the late 1980s, thus the chance that Audubon would have been able to house all the county students in its buildings after a few years of consolidation is small. This is important since one of the

⁵⁰ Ghan, “Periodic reports,” February 1995; Ghan, “Reorganization Series I,” 1996.

⁵¹ Ghan, “Reorganization Series I,” 1996. See appendix D.

biggest concerns Exirans had was the loss of one or both of its school buildings. Students from both districts would have benefited from the expanded curriculum that the joint school district could have offered. Today, when driving through either of the communities, it is obvious that both are suffering from the attrition caused by the loss of the family farm and the general decline in rural Iowa. Had the two communities been able to consolidate their schools when the opportunity presented itself in 1989, both might possibly have been better able to survive the inevitable decline of the small Iowa community.

Looking back over the whole-grade sharing struggle and the events that led up to and followed it, the question must be asked, why did Exirans fight so hard to save their school? Was it the age-old grudge over the loss of the courthouse? Was it the rivalry that had existed between the two communities for over 100 years? Or, were these issues simply excuses used by both sides to explain a conflict that no one could articulate? Exirans' fight to save their school was actually a fight to save their community. The existence of the school shaped residents' sense of place and community and without the school, they would have had to question the viability of their town. School sporting events, theatrical performances, musical productions, and other activities represented a local culture that created identity. The small-town school is not only an institution of learning, it is also a social center for the community. The school building is a shrine for the citizens of a small town, as much a focus for them as a market in an ancient city. When the shrine is threatened, the devout will fight to save it. The residents of Exira, in their fight against the whole-grade sharing agreement into which they believed they were being forced, constructed a mythology about the neighboring community of Audubon that bore little resemblance to reality. In their minds, Audubon was a menacing environment and Exira was a stable and safe place by contrast. Citizens of Exira who

favored whole-grade sharing could not comprehend this fear, and those citizens who opposed the plan could not understand why they did not. The struggle to preserve Exira High School was in the end, a battle to save a sense of place and community for Exira and its citizens.⁵²

⁵² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 86.

CHAPTER 5

Epilogue

As the twenty-first century dawns, school consolidation is once again on the minds of Iowa's legislators, educators, and rural residents. Not quite ten years have passed since the last era of school consolidation ended in 1995, but the zeitgeist of consolidation has reappeared. As in the past, several factors have led to this latest cycle. Iowa, like most states, is facing serious budget problems and state legislators must look for ways to cut the state's cost. Education is one of Iowa's biggest expenditures, and thus one of the first places on which legislators are focusing for budget cuts. Iowa's population continues to fall, especially the population in rural Iowa. Finally, after a long history of a "hands off local control of schools" policy, the federal government has taken an active role in control of school districts with its own education reform program, "No Child Left Behind." These three factors, and other local ones, are forcing small rural districts in Iowa to again look for cost-saving measures for providing education for their youth.

In 1995, when the last era of consolidation ended, there were 384 school districts in Iowa: 354 had high schools, and thirty were involved in some form of whole-grade sharing agreement with other districts. The whole-grade sharing movement ended when financial incentives disappeared and state educators and legislators ended their push for consolidation. The districts already involved in sharing agreements continued or eventually consolidated. Between 1995 and 2002, only four districts implemented new whole-grade sharing agreements.¹ In late 2002, however, talk of consolidation again echoed in the hallways of the department of education, in the state's largest newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*, and in small town school board meetings. In the spring of 2002, Iowa's Republican-controlled legislature created the Program Elimination Commission to find ways to save the financially

¹ Guy Ghan, "Long-range Planning Study, Exira Community School District," Appendix H, 2-3, 13.

strapped state up to \$100 million annually. This commission recommended that high schools with less than 100 students be required to develop plans, including mergers that would pool resources with neighboring districts. While this commission's proposals failed to receive funding and died in the legislative funnel in March of 2003, lawmakers had already planted the idea in the minds of rural residents that once again their schools were targets for eventual consolidation.²

Some members of the commission predicted legislators would not approve the measures because their implementation depended on financial penalties rather than incentives. State Senator Michael Connolly told the *Des Moines Register* "The preferred approach in previous years has been the use of reorganization incentives to encourage consolidation. 'You are putting a gun to their head. Historically, mandates of this nature have not worked.'" The paper quoted one commission spokesperson, "School districts need support and encouragement, not threats, to continue to reorganize successfully."³ In January of 2003, Department of Education (DOE) Director, Ted Stillwell, asked the legislature to support incentives to encourage small districts to consolidate. He asked for \$1.5 million into which small districts could tap in order to move toward reorganization beginning in 2003-2004. He further suggested that administrators of these small districts with a 200 or less total student population, be given two years to determine the future of their high schools. His plan included forcing districts with less than 100 students in the high school to submit a "quality education plan" that would include merger strategies. If these districts did not reorganize, the

² "Small Districts Balk at Merging Schools," *Des Moines Register*, 17 December 2002. Guy Ghan, Interview with author, Runnells, Iowa, 17 March 2003. The legislative funnel refers to the last minute process of pushing through as many bills as possible on the last day of the legislative session.

³ "Small Districts Balk at Merging Schools," *Des Moines Register*, 17 December 2002.

Commission would cut their state financial aid.⁴ The following day, members of the Iowa State Board of Education unanimously recommended the state provide the incentive funds.⁵

Immediately, proponents of small schools and residents of the communities where small schools still existed began to argue that the state was unfairly targeting them . . . again. “I understand that the state needs to explore different areas because of the revenue situation. . . . What I think is unfair is that they automatically go to the small districts,” Diagonal School District Superintendent, Karleen Stephens told the *Des Moines Register*. “There are studies that show there is a point that school districts are too large,” she went on to say. Bruce Tepfer, superintendent of schools in Terril agreed, “I think that [consolidation] should be a local effort, a local decision. We know what’s best for our districts and what’s best for our students.”⁶ As they had during the last era of consolidation in Iowa, supporters of small districts argued that low dropout rates, a dedicated staff, and a “sense of belonging” made up for the benefits of a larger district with a broader curriculum.⁷ In a recent internet poll taken by TheIowaChannel.com, Iowans answered the question, “Should smaller Iowa schools merge?” the same way they would have answered it in the 1950s. In 1958, 59 percent of Iowans asked, believed small high schools with less than 300 students would provide the best education. In the 2003 poll, 57 percent agreed with the statement, “No, smaller Iowa schools

⁴ “Proposal Would Reward High School Consolidation,” *Des Moines Register*, 16 January 2003.

⁵ “Board Backs High School Consolidation,” *Des Moines Register*, 17 January 2003.

⁶ “Small Districts Balk at Merging Schools,” *Des Moines Register*, 17 December 2002.

⁷ “Editorial: Small Schools Need to Offer More,” *Des Moines Register*, 26 January 2003.

should not be forced to merge, smaller is good.” In the later poll, 29 percent said, “yes, small schools should merge but only voluntarily.”⁸

By the twenty-first century, however, school and class size was no longer the issue. Most educators agree that smaller class size is important. The smaller the class, the better the education. Iowa legislators have passed laws that mandate smaller elementary class size and nationwide the movement has gained momentum. In an article published by the *American Educational Research Journal*, researchers reported on a seven-year study in New York City that showed small high schools provided students with a safer environment and were better able to design personalized curriculums with stronger teacher-student relationships.⁹ Small versus large is no longer the question; how small is too small is. Today most educators agree, small elementary schools are good for children, and classroom populations of less than twenty-five are best for all students, but high schools with less than 100 students are not able to provide the breadth of curriculum, level of competition, or teacher quality and experience that is necessary for an optimum education.

There are twenty-two districts in Iowa with high school populations less than 100. In 2002, 37.3 percent of Iowa schools had less than 200 students, and 62.4 percent had less than 300. Iowa is one of only eighteen states to experience a decline in school enrollment from 1995 to 2000 and its total population grew only 5.4 percent between 1990 and 2000. Clearly,

⁸ “What Size of High School?” *Wallaces Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 6 September 1958; Online Poll, <http://www.theiowachannel.com>, 18 January 2003. In the same poll 11 percent believed small schools should be forced to consolidate and 3 percent did not know. The total number of respondents to the online poll was 1,289.

⁹ “Smaller, New Approach Schools Show Good Results,” Online, <http://www.TheIowaChannel.com>, 18 January 2003.

Iowa is a rural state and because the rural population continues to decline, state educators have a major task ahead in keeping high school students in quality learning environments.¹⁰

Recently the federal government has made this task even more difficult when Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is President George W. Bush's education reform plan, based on reforms he initiated while governor of Texas. NCLB focuses on making schools responsible for the success of every child in reading and math, and by 2007, science. The bill requires schools test all children, grades three through eight, in reading and math. State educators will then use these standardized test scores to evaluate a school's effectiveness. The state will then publish "report cards" for local districts. The emphasis of NCLB is to be sure every child is performing at a satisfactory level, and while this is a noble cause, most education leaders believe it will be hard for many schools to measure up. Schools with large populations of poor and minority children, children with disabilities and limited English proficiency, and children in special education will find it very difficult to meet stringent local, state, and national goals. If a school does not meet its goals, parents will be able to move their children to a better performing school or receive supplemental services such as tutoring, after school programs, and summer schools. The bill also calls for schools to "strengthen teacher quality," by putting a "highly-trained teacher" in every classroom, and by requiring that teaching associates and others who work with students have at least an associate's degree. Unfortunately, the federal government has not guaranteed the funds that every school district in the United States will need in order to implement all of these measures. If history is a

¹⁰ Iowa Department of Education, *The Annual Condition of Education Report, 2002* (Des Moines, Ia.: Department of Education, 2002), 50. Exira's high school head count in 2002 was exactly 100.

good indicator, there will not be enough money to make NCLB work. States like Iowa, that are already struggling just to support the schools as they are, will certainly find it difficult to provide more money for all the needed programs.¹¹

Rural schools in Iowa will have some advantages over larger urban schools, because the population of the targeted students is lower in rural areas, and Iowa law already allows open enrollment so that parents can put their children in a district other than their own if they desire. It will be much more difficult to attract “highly-trained teachers” to small schools, however, because they are unable to compete with the salaries large school districts can offer. It will also be challenging for small districts to hire associates with a college degree. While No Child Left Behind is not an immediate threat to very small districts like Exira, because there is a loophole provided for schools with less than thirty children per class, it may still be a powerful tool for state legislators and educators to use when the discussion of rural school consolidation is once again on the table.¹²

On 1 April 2003, school officials in Exira used an explanation of No Child Left Behind and its potential impact on the local district as an icebreaker at its annual Spring Town Meeting. About sixty residents of the small community attended the meeting and many were there to hear what District Superintendent Charles Johnson had to say about the future of the Exira district. In February of 2003, the Exira School Board hired Guy Ghan, a school consolidation consultant, to undertake a feasibility study for the district. The board

¹¹ “No Child Left Behind Fact Sheet,” Online, <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea>, accessed 19 March 2003; Rural School and Community Trust, “No Child Left Behind, Report and Analysis,” Online, <http://www.nhpr.org>, accessed 9 March 2003; “How to Educate ‘A Country Left Behind,’” Opinion page, *Des Moines Register*, 16 March 2003.

¹² Ibid.

intended the study to assist the members with long-range planning for the district. Johnson presented this study to the community at the meeting. What Ghan had recommended, and what Johnson told the Exira residents, was that the strong potential for continued enrollment loss in the area made it necessary for the district to think about a whole-grade sharing agreement with whatever neighboring district would be the best long-range partner for reorganization. Just thirteen years after the last bitter fight to save their school from consolidation, Exirans are once again facing the dreaded, but potential loss of their beloved school.¹³

When the 2002-2003 school year began in Exira, there were 286 students in attendance. This number was thirty-one less than the year before, an almost 10 percent decline in enrollment. Exactly 100 students enrolled in the high school, which put the district right on the edge of the Program Elimination Commission's minimum acceptable high school enrollment for a district. The Iowa Department of Education's projected enrollment for Exira over the next five years shows a further loss of twenty-three students, leaving the district below the minimum high school enrollment and very close to the minimum overall enrollment. In most of the criteria Ghan examined in his study, Exira fell within satisfactory boundaries, thus, according to Ghan and Johnson, declining enrollment is the foremost reason for Exira's predicament.¹⁴

Along with enrollment, Ghan's study focused on six other areas of consideration including: finances, programs and services, economic base, expenditure patterns and staffing, facilities, and community characteristics. In some of these categories, the Exira district was

¹³ The author attended this meeting and was able to discuss the school issue with several Exira citizens in attendance.

¹⁴ Ghan, "Long-range Planning Study," 12.

in as good or better shape than many districts its same size and in some cases, better than the state average. For example, at the end of the 2001 school year, the Exira district had an unspent balance, the equivalent of a profit balance in business, of \$443,792, or \$1,180 per pupil. The state per pupil average that year was \$838. During the 2002-2003 academic year, the Exira high school offered its students 58.50 course units, the average for similar size districts that year was 56.65 and the state's minimum standard was 43.00. During the present school year, the economic base of the district, as evidenced by the per pupil taxable property base, which Ghan claims is a good measure of how a district can handle adversities, is \$214,652 compared to a the state average \$202,844. This year the district's per pupil cost, funds received from both local property tax and state funding, is \$4,557, which is just slightly below the state average of \$4,591. The Exira district is presently taking advantage of every optional funding program available and as of this school year, it is not relying on the budget guarantee which is a property tax fund used to cushion districts budgets that are experiencing declining enrollment. According to superintendent Johnson, Exira will need to take advantage of the budget guarantee next year to make up for the thirty-one-student loss it experienced this year.¹⁵

One argument legislators and state-level educators use for consolidation of small rural schools is that it is more expensive to run the small school. This is true in Exira. During the 2000-2001 school year the Exira district spent \$7,464 dollars per student from the general fund to pay for his or her education. This amount puts the district in the 87.3 percentile for the state where the average expenditure per pupil is \$6,601. The items that have an adverse

¹⁵ Ibid., 15-22. The state finance law sets the per pupil cost and districts have no control over it. Charles Johnson, speech at the Exira Spring Town Meeting, 1 April 2003.

impact on the district's budget are not salaries or employee benefits; small districts usually are not able to offer higher competitive salaries and tend to hire inexperienced teachers, thus keeping this budget item lower than average. Rather the most expensive items in the budget include supplies, and purchased services, which include tuition for open-enrolled students out of the districts. In September of 2002, Exira had a net loss of forty-one students due to open enrollment. This number represents more than 12 percent of the student population in the district and constitutes a loss of \$186,837 in the budget.¹⁶

Open enrollment out of the district has been a financial concern since 1990 when it first became an option for parents who supported the failed whole-grade sharing agreement with Audubon. Since then approximately fifty students per year have traveled to neighboring districts to attend school and have taken their tax support with them. Most of the children from the families that sent their students to Audubon in response to the failed sharing agreement in 1990 have since graduated from high school. In 2002, however, thirty-three of the fifty-two students who are open-enrolled out of the Exira district are attending the Audubon district schools. Of the remaining nineteen, thirteen attend in the Atlantic district, a much larger district twenty minutes south of Exira. Four students travel to Anita, which is comparable in size to Exira but is closer to those students in the southeastern sections of the district than Exira. Two more students go to the Guthrie Center district, just east of Audubon County. These numbers lead to the conclusion that there are still strong feelings about the failed attempt at whole-grade sharing with Audubon, thus many residents of the Exira

¹⁶ Ghan, "Long-range Planning Study," 10, 24-29. Exira does maintain a higher than average number of teachers in its district. In 2001-2002 the district had thirty-one teachers compared to an average of 26.90 in similar size districts.

District are still choosing to send their students there even though it is not the closest, nor the best school district situated coterminously with Exira.¹⁷

Ghan's report gives a brief description of the average Exira student. The district has a very low percent of minority students, only 3.1 percent of the total number, a low dropout rate, (no dropouts were recorded for the year examined,) and no students with limited English proficiency. The district does however have a large number of students receiving free and reduced-cost lunches, (31 percent). This figure is a good indicator of the economic status of the community. These numbers indicate that the community is largely white and lower to middle class. Of the twenty-eight students who graduated from high school in 2002, nineteen went on to some sort of higher education and nine chose not to do so. This figure differs from the state average in that it represents 32 percent of the total number of students, while the state average for graduates in Iowa who choose not to pursue a post high school education was only 24 percent. Once again this could be an indicator of a population base with lower-than-average economic means.¹⁸

Finally, Ghan's study reported that the Exira district, like many other small districts in Iowa, is faced with a facilities situation that will not be easy to fix. Exira has two school buildings, the elementary building built in 1915 and upgraded in the 1950s, and the high school building finished in 1959. According to Ghan, the high school building is stable, and while "it is showing its age," it is a good building that the district should consider spending some money on in order to maintain its usefulness. Ghan describes the older structure as "a building that holds little value." Unfortunately for Exira, the beloved three-story brick

¹⁷ Ibid., 32. See map 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

building, which the community was so proud of in 1915, has, like so many others, outlived its usefulness. The expense of maintaining the building according to state standards becomes more expensive every year. The building has become a relic of the past.¹⁹

This leads to some questions Exira's citizens must ask themselves. Is the Exira Independent School District also a relic of the past? Can the community hold on to its school system as it is today, or will the state's financial problems, new federal regulations, and declining enrollment force the district to look to its neighbors for an answer to its educational woes? Ghan, in his study for the Exira district, concluded that the district has little choice but to consider whole-grade sharing and eventual consolidation. Student enrollment in Exira has fallen more than 60 percent since it peak in 1972, and evidence shows this pattern is not likely to change. Audubon County is one of five counties in the state that has never gained in population since 1900. In 2000, the county reported the largest decrease in population in the state and the lowest birthrate. Ghan claimed the only form of relief for the small community is drastic growth in population, and this is not likely to happen.²⁰

Exira is a proud little community that has fought for a 150 years to build and maintain its schools, making them the best they can be for the children who live in the town and those in the surrounding countryside. Exirans have also clung to their school as a way of maintaining their rural lifestyle and community. The possibility of losing part or all of their school system is something no one wants to think about. Exira residents know what can happen to a small town that through consolidation, is left without its school. A drive through

¹⁹ Ibid., 31; Charles Johnson, interview with author, telephone, 13 March 2003.

²⁰ Ghan, "Long-range Planning Study," 13, 36; Iowa Department of Education, *The Annual Condition of Education Report*, 4, 9; Ghan, interview.

rural Iowa will prove to anyone that, as one Exira resident said recently, “When you lose your school, you lose everything.”²¹ Small towns in Audubon County such as Viola, Gray, and Brayton all gave up their consolidated schools in earlier eras of reorganization, and all that remains of these communities are a cluster of homes with possibly a co-op elevator or a gas station. The grocery, hardware, and dime stores that used to line the tiny main streets are gone and all that is left are boarded-up buildings and empty lots. These communities dot the landscape of Iowa and are proof that a small town needs its school to maintain its vitality.

A recent study by Iowa State University professors and published in the *Des Moines Register* states, “School mergers are good for students, parents and teachers but suck the life out of towns left without a school.” This article, along with a companion piece on the Iowa State University news web page, lay out exactly what happens to a small community when consolidation closes the local school. The study, done by Tom Alsbury and Cathy Curtis in the College of Education and Kevin Brown of the News Service at Iowa State University, looked at nine merged school districts in Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Wisconsin, Michigan, North Carolina, Maine, and Oregon, and identified the impact of school closings on small communities. Their findings resulted in several recommendations for schools considering future mergers and closings. According to the study, the positive results of the mergers were increased diversity of the student body, more funding, flexibility for staff and teachers, expanded programs for special needs and talented and gifted students, better student support and improved educational quality. Negative results included a loss of the feeling of local control when one school board was eliminated, a lingering sense of animosity between the merged districts, a loss of administrative positions, and a “death blow” to the community that

²¹ Randy Thompson, comment to author at the Exira Spring Town Meeting, 1 April 2003.

lost its school building. This death blow came when businesses closed and residents moved either to the community with the school so their children could be closer, or out of the district altogether. In a community like Exira, where the largest employer in the town is the school district, this loss would be especially painful.²²

Exira is just one of many districts in Iowa that are once again facing consolidation. Stanton, a town of 747 in Southwestern Iowa, is one of the twenty-four districts in the state with less than 100 students in its high school. Stanton maintains one building and has 96 high school students. Local residents generally oppose consolidation because, as Superintendent Judd Ashely is quoted, "Stanton would lose its very identity. The school is basically the heartbeat of the community." Another retired resident of the town agreed; "Stanton wouldn't survive."²³ In Iowa's smallest school district, Lineville-Clio, residents recently voted to build a new elementary school in order to guarantee some leverage in any up-coming forced consolidation. Members of the two tiny towns agreed to spend \$980,000 dollars, \$10,000 more than their annual school budget, on the new building in order to keep their elementary children close by. One resident said, "We want to keep an elementary school here, even if we have to lose our high school. Our community is based around our schools in a lot of ways."²⁴ While state officials argue that keeping a community intact is not a good enough reason to avoid consolidation, citizens of Iowa's small towns are willing to do almost anything to save their main streets and their individual community identities.

²² "Study: School Mergers Help Students, Teachers," *Des Moines Register*, 19 March 2003; "Merged Schools Districts Can Be Positive For Students, National Study by Iowa State Finds," Iowa State University News Service, Online, <http://www.iastate.edu>. Accessed 24 March 2003.

²³ "Stanton Residents Fear Effects of Consolidation," *Des Moines Register*, 14 March 2003.

²⁴ "Smallest District to Build New School," *Des Moines Register*, 20 February 2003.

The large turnout at the Exira Spring Town Meeting clearly shows that residents of that town are worried as well. Many of the same people who opposed whole-grade sharing in 1989 attended the meeting. Exira, unfortunately, has very few options for its future, therefore, it is important that school officials approach the situation in a different manner than they did in 1989. According to experts like Guy Ghan, local school administrators and board members must involve the community in the decision to whole-grade share or consolidate. The study done by Iowa State University researchers offers several suggestions for a successful merger of school districts. They recommend districts change the name of the district to include both community names, and change the school mascot and logos, seals, and signs. Districts should hire a new superintendent who has no ties to either community and he or she should be highly visible in both. The study recommends that states make funds available for transportation, early retirement, and construction. Mergers should be gradual, with athletic and extra-curricular sharing taking place first. Above all, the researchers recommend compromise between the two districts. These are the same recommendations state educators offered in the earlier consolidation movement in 1980s and 1990s; school officials involved in the attempted whole-grade sharing agreement between Audubon and Exira in 1989, however, did not follow them.²⁵

Exirans have options available to help them maintain and even improve their education program. Financially the district is sound and the tax base is strong. Exira has neighboring communities like Elk Horn, Audubon, and Anita that are in a similar situation, so citizens can look in more than one direction when choosing a partner for eventual

²⁵ "Study: School Mergers Help Students, Teachers," *Des Moines Register*, 19 March 2003; "Merged Schools Districts Can Be Positive For Students, National Study by Iowa State Finds," Iowa State University News Service, Online, <http://www.iastate.edu>. Accessed 24 March 2003.

consolidation. Finally, the high school building built in 1959 is in good condition and with some modernization and continued maintenance, it should last the district a long time. The building gives the district leverage if and when it decides to once again look at sharing options. With careful planning and compromise, Exira should be able to maintain a school building in its community. Exira is small, but it is not dying like many towns in Iowa. The community still has a grocery store, a drug store, and two gas stations, four churches, a lumberyard, a car dealership, a doctor's office, and several small businesses that fill most of the storefronts on the main street. The town still hosts one of the largest Fourth of July celebrations in Southwest Iowa and local civic organizations are strong and active. The most painful part of change is the realization that its time has come, and when Exirans decide it is time to consider what the best opportunities for their school children are, they will be able to make the changes necessary and continue to live in a small but healthy community. The identity of a community exists in its residents and the residents of Exira and the surrounding countryside will continue to maintain that identity as long as they are able to maintain a school building. Their school district may change and grow to include other parts of the county, but Exira is a long way from losing its identity and Exirans their sense of place.

APPENDIX A

Community Survey

The *Audubon County Journal* published this information on 24 February 1989. It is just a small portion of the survey that was distributed to over 1000 Exira school patrons. It appears to be an odd collection of the responses given. There is not much focus on the actual subject at hand.

Exirans rank school district issues

4=strongly agree 3=agree 2=disagree 1=strongly disagree

- 3.16 Maintain the current level of availability of extracurricular, non-athletic activities.
- 3.15 Maintain the current level of elective course offerings.
- 2.95 Maintain the current level of purchases of educational equipment and supplies.
- 2.95 Current academic sharing arrangements should be continued.
- 2.94 Increased sharing of administrators should be considered.
- 2.93 Provide support staff salaries which are competitive with those of similar type districts.
- 2.88 Current extracurricular activity sharing arrangements should be continued.
- 2.84 Maintain the current level of availability of extracurricular athletic activities.
- 2.65 Raise local taxes to continue to provide a quality educational program.
- 2.57 Increase class size to help maintain all educational programs.
- 2.49 Maintain the current level of purchases of administrative office equipment and supplies.
- 2.25 Maintain the current level of administrative travel expenses.
- 2.12 Whole grade sharing with another district should be considered.
- 2.01 Exira should consider merging or consolidation with another school district.

“School District Patrons Prefer, ‘Going it Alone,’” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 24 February 1989.

APPENDIX B

Conclusions and Recommendations

William A Anderson of Educator's Leadership Services, Inc presented this list of conclusions and recommendations to the joint school board on 15 June 1998.

- 1) A written description of services and/or personnel to be shared, including both curricular and activity programs.
- 2) A method of financing to adjust costs between districts, and when and how such payments are to be made.
- 3) An agreement on the duration of the agreement (usually three to five years).
- 4) A method of renewal or termination of agreement.
- 5) The development of mutual policies and administrative rules for directing the actions of administration, staff, and students.
- 6) An understanding between districts of who is the employer for each staff member
- 7) The acceptance of special arrangements to assure continues decision making such as joint board meetings, administrative communications, and regular orientation.
- 8) Clear provisions for handling of complaints and resolution of conflicts.
- 9) Clear and uniform provisions for governance of students.
- 10) A use of facilities policy between districts for extracurricular events and scheduling school and nonschool events.
- 11) And agreement on Transportation arrangements and responsibilities
- 12) A secure understanding from each district's insurance company of all liability and insurability considerations with the sharing agreement.
- 13) An agreement on graduation requirements, class ranking, honors, diplomas, and ceremonies.
- 14) The determination of sports teams, school colors, uniforms, athletic awards, nickname and mascot rings, yearbook, prom arrangements, etc.
- 15) The establishment of a uniform textbook fee, lab and towel fees, and other student charges.
- 16) An agreement on all calendar matters length of school day, schedules, inservice programs, holidays, and starting and ending school dates.
- 17) And agreement on separate responsibilities for supervision and evaluation of employees.
- 18) Possible joint use of legal services for the purpose of operating agreement.

"Large crowd attends whole grade sharing meeting," *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 June 1989.

APPENDIX C

Thomas Payne Obituary

The following obituary for Thomas J. Payne appeared in the December 22nd 1989 edition of the *Audubon County Journal*. Mr. Payne is still remembered for his part in ending the whole-grade sharing agreement.

Thomas J Payne, the son of Dr. R.H. and Lois Marshall Payne, was born August 15, 1921 at Linden and died December 14th, 1989 at the Cass County Memorial Hospital in Atlantic, at the age of 68 years.

He was a life-long member of the Federated United Church of Christ. He attended Exira schools graduating with the High School class of 1938 and then worked in construction.

On February 28, 1942 he was united in marriage to Beverly Nymand of Brayton at a Lutheran Church in Omaha, Neb. They lived in Exira all their married life. He was self employed in the construction industry for approximately ten years, and was then employed by Henningsen Construction of Atlantic as a construction superintendent until he was forced to retire due to failing health in 1979.

He was active in the affairs of the Federated Church serving as treasurer and also active in civic affairs. He had been a member of the Exira Volunteer Fire Department for many years and a member of the Audubon County Board of Education for 19 years. For many years he played semi-pro baseball, playing against many of the great players such as Dizzy Dean and Satchel Paige and was an avid supporter of Exira semi-pro baseball team. He continued his love for sports by following his three sons' participation in many sporting activities beginning with little league games, Jr. high, high school and college events.

Preceding him in death were two grandchildren: Amy Lois Payne and Marshall Payne; his parents and one brother, Jack Payne.

Survivors include his wife, Beverly Payne of Exira; his sons and their spouses: Dr. Thomas J. and Denise Payne of Atlantic, Paul N and Carol Payne of Muscatine, Robert M. and Peggy Payne of Oldsmar, Fla.; his grandchildren, brothers and sisters, many nieces and nephews, and friends.

Funeral services were conducted by Pastor Nancy Jensen on December 18, 1989 at the Federated United Church of Christ in Exira. Internment was in the Exira Cemetery.

“Obituary: Thomas J. Payne” *Audubon County (Iowa) Journal*, 22 December 1989.

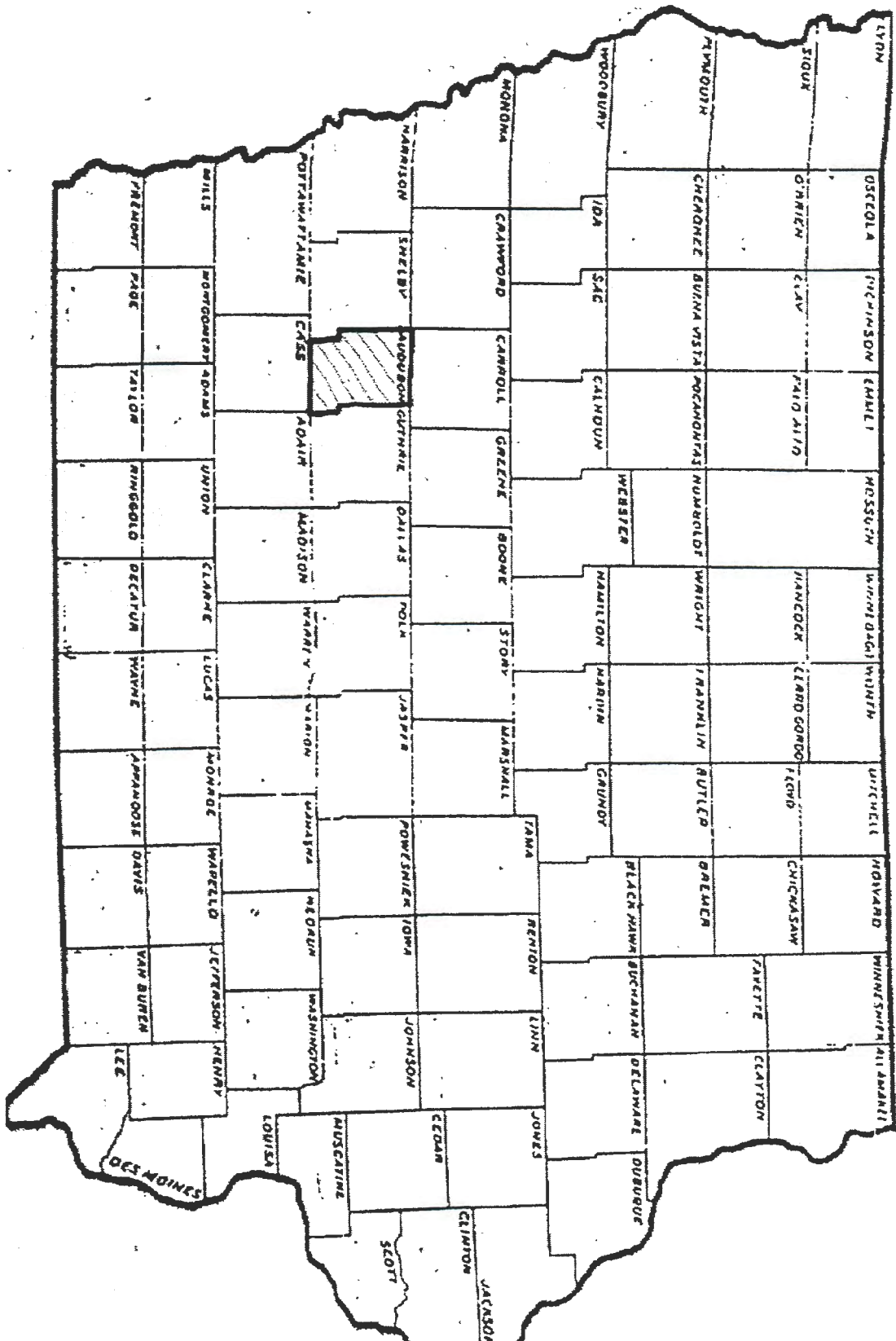
APPENDIX D
Number of School Districts

| Year | Number Districts | Number Districts With High Schools |
|-------------|-------------------------|---|
| 1984-85 | 438 | 437 |
| 1985-86 | 436 | 431 |
| 1986-87 | 436 | 426 |
| 1987-88 | 436 | 415 |
| 1988-89 | 433 | 405 |
| 1989-90 | 431 | 389 |
| 1990-91 | 430 | 378 |
| 1991-92 | 425 | 371 |
| 1992-93 | 418 | 362 |
| 1993-94 | 397 | 358 |
| 1994-95 | 390 | 354 |

In 1980-1981 there were 443 school districts in Iowa. Almost 120 districts have reorganized since 1980-81, and more than 170 have signed whole-grade sharing contracts. However, during that period of time there were 31 failed attempts at total reorganization. Of these, 24 districts voted to reorganize on the second try.

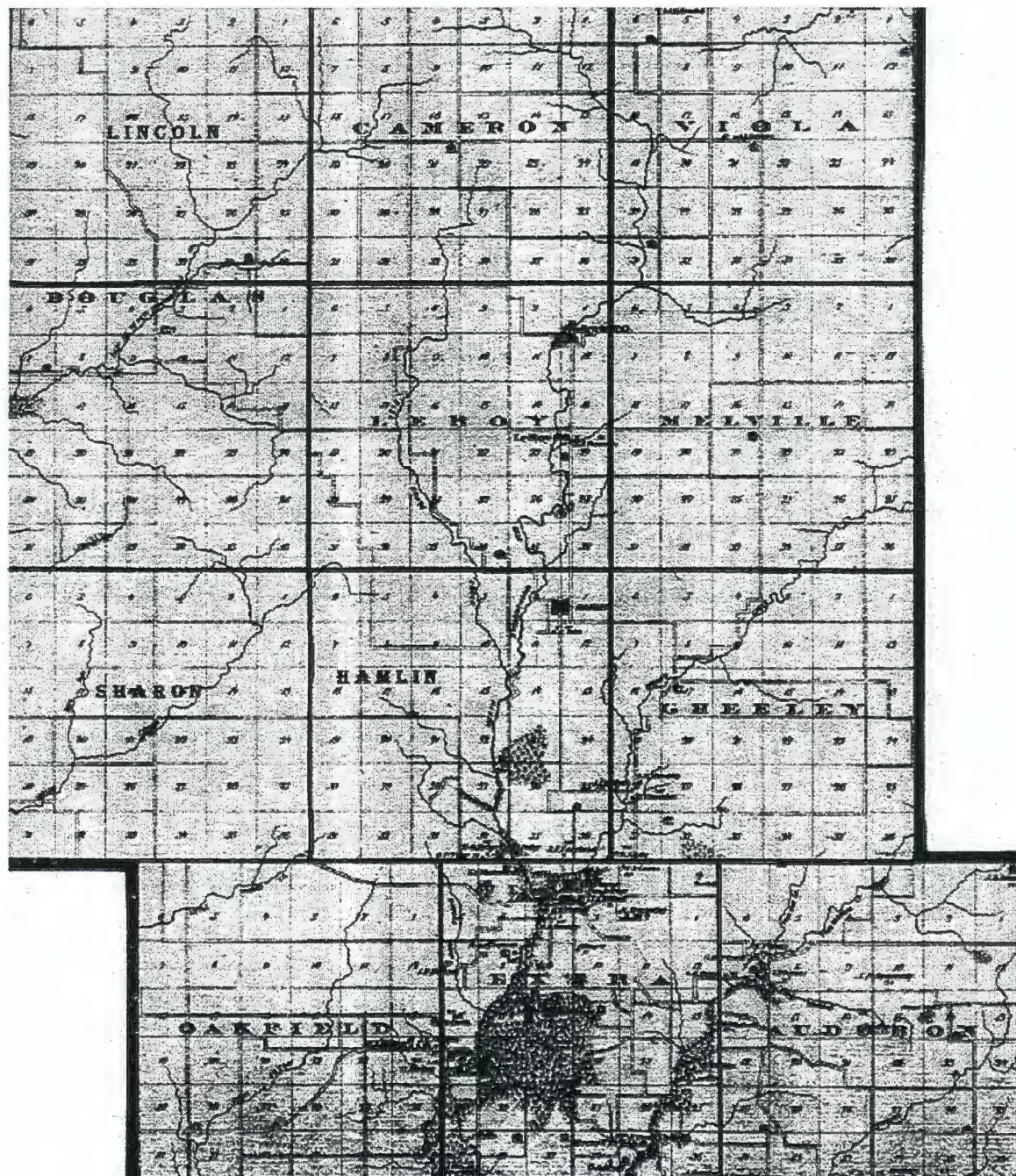
Periodic Report: Iowa Department of Education, February 1995.

MAP 1
Audubon County, Iowa



County Map of Iowa, [HTTP://www.earth.uni.edu/EECP/elm/iowa.gif](http://www.earth.uni.edu/EECP/elm/iowa.gif),
 Accessed, 7 May 2003.

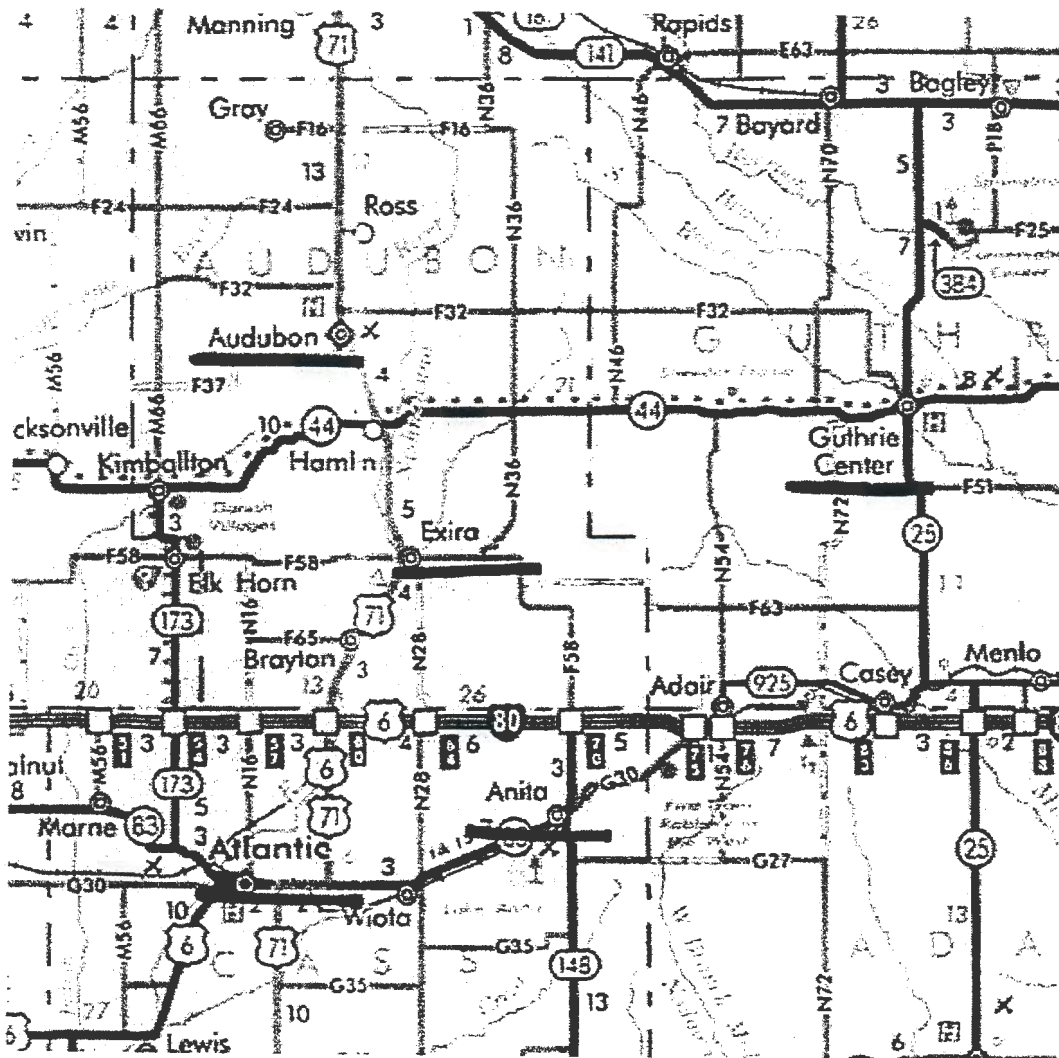
MAP 2
Audubon County – Township Map



Map of Audubon County, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~anneryan/audubon.jpg>, accessed, 7 May 2003.

MAP 3 Surrounding Community Locations

In 2003, Exira students open-enrolled out of the district went to the communities of Atlantic, Anita, Audubon, and Guthrie Center.



Iowa Department of Transportation, "Map of Iowa," 2001.

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